

Sefton fostering service

Annual report

2016–2017



Introduction

This report provides information about the Fostering Service and outcomes for children and young people looked after by Sefton M.B.C, from 1st April 2016- 31st March 2017. The purpose of the annual report is to inform the Public, Elected Member's, Partners and Staff of the progress and developments in the Service during this period.

In 2016/17 the Fostering Service has continued to develop and improve practice to meet the needs of children/young people looked after by Sefton and address the requirements of national guidance and fostering standards.

Background

The remit of the Fostering Service is highly circumscribed by legislation and regulations. The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 are the primary sources of legislation that guide fostering practice, but the service also takes account of other child care legislation such as the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and the Care Leavers (England) Regulation 2010.

When a child/young person becomes looked after, it is one of the most important and significant changes in their life and it is critical that the families who look after these most vulnerable children/young people through foster care are the best they can be. Sefton Council wants to create a fairer future for our most vulnerable children/young people and their families; we want every child/young person to grow up in a safe, stable and loving home. For those young children who cannot remain or return home safely to their birth families, good quality foster care offers them the best opportunity to experience a warm and loving family environment while appropriate plans are

made for their future.

The Fostering Service is a service for children/young people in care. It is committed to supporting stable placements for children and young people where foster care is their identified plan. The service is a key element in the council's drive to place more children and young people with Sefton foster carers in or near their community.

The aim of the Fostering Service is to provide high quality care for children and young people in safe, secure and nurturing families by means of recruiting and developing highly skilled foster carers.

A key strength of the Fostering Service is the ability of the staff to remain child focused whilst providing a high level of support to the foster carers. Over the last year, there has been an increase in the number of children needing permanence and a significant number of requests to place sibling groups of two and above. The team has continued to work hard to keep children/young people in local in-house foster placements thereby enabling them to maintain links with their birth families and their community.

Research indicates that placement stability for children/young people in care is an important factor for them having more positive outcomes during their lives. Changes of placement and primary carers cause instability in terms of attachment and sometimes disruption in education, friendships, etc. Young people find it hard to invest in placements if they do not believe they will remain there long-term and this in turn impacts on all aspects of their lives.

For Sefton, as for many other authorities, getting the right number and type of permanent placements is a significant challenge. The Fostering Service has a very good knowledge of

the local area and its resources and strives to consider diversity including ethnicity, culture, and religion when identifying placements.

Sefton's key objective is to keep children within their family of origin where it is safe to do so and to prevent children from unnecessarily entering the care system. Where children do enter care we seek to achieve, timely, secure attachment to permanent carers. We recognise the importance of family, particularly sibling relationships and promote meaningful contact if this is in the child's best interest. For those children in our care, we aspire to help them achieve their full potential.

The current number of children looked after (CLA) 447 represents a 5% reduction against the 474 children looked after at the beginning of the year and a rate of 84 per 10,000 of the population which is on par with the regional average. This reduction has largely been achieved by the discharge of care orders involving children placed at home with parents. In addition due to the high number of older teenagers entering care in 2014-15 we have had a higher number leaving care on their 18th birthday. It remains Sefton's objective to reduce the number of children coming into care where it is safe to do so and particularly to improve choices for those who do enter care in line with their needs. In our commitment to this strategic objective, there remains a concerted effort to monitor the number and reasons for children coming into care.

Recent Research

The children's commissioner has launched a new measure based on research of stability for looked after children/young people which brings together data on care placements, schools and social workers. The social worker changes data is based on pilot collection from 22 local

authorities. Findings from this initial index included that:

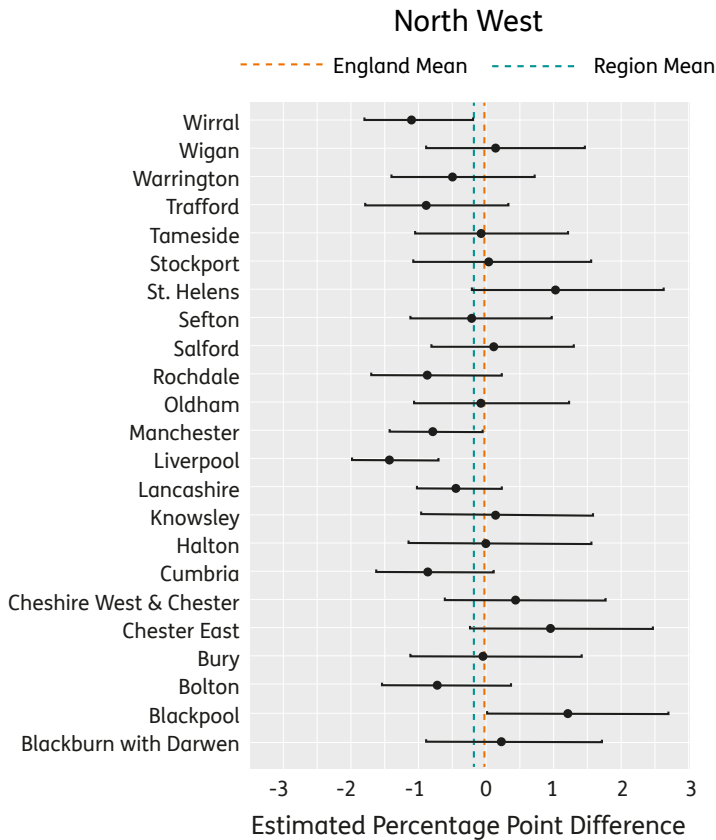
An estimated 50,000 children in care (71% of all children in care in England) on 31st March 2016 experienced a change in their placement, school or social worker over a 12 month period.

Of the 7,269 children/young people where information was available for all three stability measures 69% experienced a change in at least one measure and 5% experienced a change in all three.

Nationally, this would be equivalent to around 2000 children/young people in care attending school experiencing a change in their placement, school and social worker all within the same year.

Sefton strive for stability for children/young people in care. Children/young people work to fulfil their aspirations when in a stable secure placement. Sefton care leavers emphasise stability was the most important aspect of their experience in care.

The table below estimates the differences in the percentage of children/young people experiencing two or more placement moves by Local Authorities. Each black dot shows the difference between a local authority estimated percentage of children experiencing multiple placements (where lower is better). It must be considered that different authorities make use of different proportions of placement types and this may affect their ability to maintain stability. However, the table shows that Sefton's performance is in line with regional and national averages.



quality. They do not stand alone, but are an integral part of achieving service strategies and policies and meeting procedural and operational requirements. The standards in the manual are designed to improve consistency in practice across the borough and drive up the quality of the service provided to the vulnerable children / young people of Sefton and their families.

Information about the Fostering Service

The Fostering Service and its foster carers continue to provide a high level of care and promote the health, welfare and safety of children/young people. Foster carers receive a high level of support from qualified workers in line with statutory regulations and guidance. A robust training and development package enables foster carers to develop their understanding and skills in supporting children/young people and promote positive outcomes.

Ofsted 2016

- Ofsted have stated in their report of (Education, Children’s Services and skills 2016) that they are worried that there are local authorities that are still not doing enough for children/young people. They believe that councillors and managers in the council are the ones that can make the most difference in order for this to happen they need to
- Make children/young people their priority
- Know what they should be doing for children/young people
- Help social workers to be able to do their job well by giving them the time they need and the right help and support.

Sefton as part of the Ofsted improvement plan have created a new practice Standards Manual for children’s social care. The aim of the manual is for children’s workers to view and approach the services that are delivered to an agreed

Sefton’s Fostering Service supervises and supports foster carers to ensure they provide looked after children/young people with care that reasonably meets their needs, takes the children’s wishes and feelings into account, and actively promotes individual care, along with supporting their health, safety, enjoyment, education and their preparation for the future.

Sefton currently has 86 mainstream fostering households, comprising of 70 couples and 16 single carers, with a total capacity of 130 children placed in short-term and long-term placements a number of these places are not currently available at the end of March 2017. This has been explored and we have developed a plan to make better use of the available capacity and to monitor this more regularly. There are 58 **Connected persons/** kinship households, 96 carers, 38 couples, 20 single carers.

Sefton foster carers do a good job in supporting

children and young people who do not move placements frequently as a rule and they stay with their carer(s) until either the outcome of care proceedings or the care plan is for them to return to the care of birth parents. Sefton's fostering service strongly believes that children/young people should not experience further trauma of a placement breakdown and is fully committed to providing support to placements that are at risk of breaking down. Where it appears that there will be a likely disruption, in the first instance a meeting will take place with the foster carer and social worker and the carers supervising social worker to offer additional support to address the issues of concern. Consultation and support for the child/young person takes place initially with their social worker, to enable them to express their views or to consider how issues can possibly be resolved. There is ongoing monitoring of the issues of concern through effective sharing of information of professionals and foster carers.

Sefton's foster carers live in close proximity to the child/young person's family and community making contact easier. Sefton also has a good track record of keeping siblings together. Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements do tend to be further away, so reducing the dependence on this type of placement would help keep Sefton children/young people local to their families and networks of support along with financial savings of less use of IFA placements.

A quarterly newsletter continues to be sent out to all foster carers keeping them up to date with any changes, news of what's happening within the service; and what's available.

Mentoring Scheme

The Fostering Service has introduced a mentoring scheme that consists of six experienced foster carers. This is presently in the pilot stage. The

aim of the service is to provide one-one support to newly approved foster carers. As the scheme becomes more established we will increase the number of mentors and consider providing existing foster carer's access to mentors. The feedback from carers that have been matched to a mentor has been positive and newly approved foster carers have found the scheme beneficial, useful and informative. As part of the service development we are looking to introduce a connected person /kinship mentoring scheme in the near future as this is a gap in the service.

Training attendances

There have been 450 training attendances over 49 courses this year. This compares with 365 in 2015-2016 over 43 courses. As a service we continue to be responsive to carers needs by developing our training and listening to carers views on which courses are crucial in assisting them in their fostering task. We use foster carers as co-facilitators on the Transitions and Endings course which helps make the training responsive to carers needs, reflect their lived experience and respond to the messages from research.

Connected persons/ Kinship carers

In 2016 tailored training was developed to meet the needs of connected persons/ kinship carers and increase their engagement with the service. In 2016/2017 connected persons/kinship carers attended training on 71 occasions making up 11.5% of all training attendance for the service and 16% of all foster carer attendance. The Special Guardianship workshop was attended by 12 carers. This flagged up the need for future development in regards to training and support services for carers with Special Guardianship Orders.

In common with most local authorities, Sefton has seen a significant increase in the number of extended family members assessed, as part

of court proceedings, to provide placements either as a connected person (Kinship) fostering arrangement or more commonly under a Special Guardianship Order (SGO).

115 Viability Assessments were completed within this year a slight decrease than previous year 124. As a service we continue to recognise this is a high rate compared to those finally approved as carer for a child.

24 Regulation 24 (emergency) placements were assessed within this year.

7 Connected Persons / Kinship Assessments were terminated by the Fostering Service and presented to the Fostering Panel as per Regulation and the recommendation was also made by the Fostering Panel and ratified by the agency decision maker (ADM). Compared to the previous year when 14 were terminated at panel. No applications were made to the independent Review Mechanism (IRM).

24 SGOs were granted, enabling children/young people to leave our care and be safely care for by family members.

12 mainstream households have been deregistered.

- 4 households retired from fostering
- 3 households were deregistered following non-engagement with the service
- 1 through ill-health
- 3 households took up full time employment
- 1 at the carers request

In addition the Fostering Service undertakes work with family and friends who provide and support placements for children/young people with extended family members and other connected people who have a prior relationship with a child/young person. This area of activity continues to grow due to the demands made by the courts

following the implementation of the 26 week time scale for dealing with care proceedings. Emergency placements made under Regulation 24 of the fostering Regulations 2011 continue to be used.

Whilst it is not without challenges, the Fostering Service has a crucial role in keeping children within their own family setting and meeting the overall strategy of keeping children in local permanent placements. The recruitment and assessment process differs from that for mainstream foster carers but still requires compliance with the Fostering Regulations 2011.

The service will continue to focus on high quality outcomes for children/young people who are looked after in Sefton and ensure children/young people are consulted and views incorporated in their care plan

Staying Put

Staying Put is a national policy, introduced in April 2014, which allows looked after children to stay in their foster placement after their 18th birthday. The Fostering Service works closely with the child's social worker to ensure that if Staying Put is the plan both sides understand the changes in the legal and emotional relationship that this brings. Foster carers have raised some concerns about their understanding of the scheme and the Service plans to put on a training event in the near future. The number of Staying Put arrangements currently stands at 27.

Recruitment

There were 211 fostering enquiries shown in the table below from April 2016/ March 2017

Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
14	29	14	2	6	34	18	10	6	23	26	29

61 progressed to Initial visit

In regards to the applicants that withdrew from their enquiry reasons why:

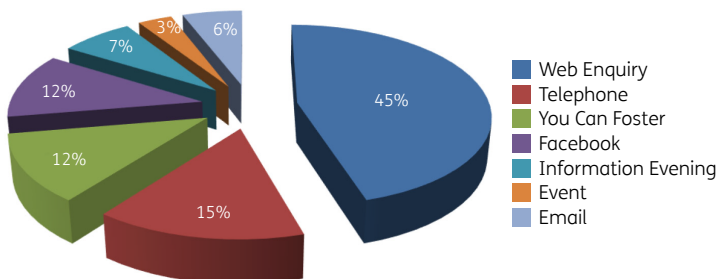
- Health reasons
- Work commitments
- Proceeding with another agency
- Pregnant/planning
- Reason unknown
- Financial reasons
- Worried about the impact
- Applying to adopt

Reasons the service felt applicants unsuitable

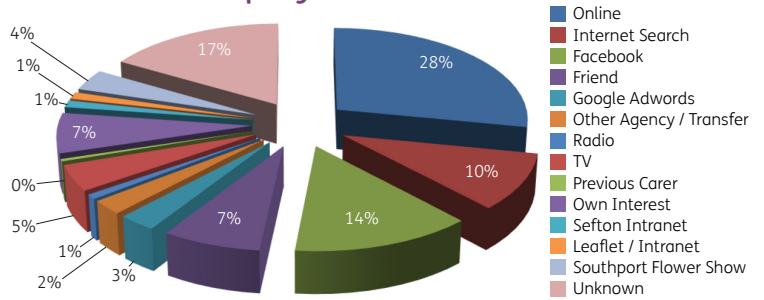
- Ill health
- Partner recently moved in
- Renovating the home
- CP concerns
- Unsuitable
- Too far out the area
- Ex-partner contact
- No discussion with their children had taken place.

The graphs below show statistics of where enquiries are generated from and which area carries the most interest.

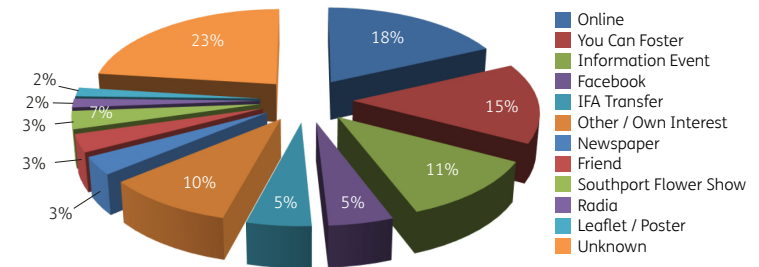
Method of Enquiry



Source of Enquiry



Source of enquiries that progress to registration of interest



Marketing publicity and communications staff that design and coordinate recruitment campaigns support the Sefton Fostering Service. Generally, campaigns build on existing links with the local community to ensure the service recruits carers from a wide range of backgrounds. Throughout the year the service has run carefully coordinated campaigns, which include a wide range of media such as poster sites, leaflet-drops, community events, information sessions, 4 day event at Southport Flower Show and press advertising, digital campaigns which include Google, Face book, and Twitter.

The Fostering Service has developed a new website in order to aid the recruitment of foster carers. The website provides a comprehensive and wide range of information for potential foster carers including a questions and answers page and it has an on-line application registration link. www.sefton.gov.uk/fostering

The number of children Looked After in Sefton has increased and therefore the need to recruit more foster carers has become increasingly important. As with other neighbouring authorities

in recruiting carers has become an increasing challenge. There has also been a steady number of carers transferring to Sefton from independent fostering agencies, which has been positive as they are generally experienced carers. They generally report that guaranteed placements plus the excellent support and training available in Sefton have influenced their decision.

Recruitment Objectives

The challenge to recruit Sefton foster carers continues to be high on the service agenda. This is the single most important area of need within the service to manage the demand for placements. The following are the objective priorities within our recruitment strategy:

- Continue to develop a comprehensive, high quality fostering service to Sefton's residents which is sensitive to the needs of all, recognises differences and is reflective of ethnic origin, culture, faith, gender, disability, economic and sexual orientation.
- Continue providing information, advice and guidance to those wishing to foster and to children and young people and their families using the service in Sefton.
- To actively recruit families for children/young people in Sefton who require permanence outside of their birth family.
- Continue to provide support to all those involved in fostering in developing the skills and competencies to provide the best possible care for looked after children/young people. This includes children and families who need support when children/young people are in care.
- The Fostering Service continues in its commitment to increasing the number of foster carers for all ages of children/young people especially for teenagers.

- That our foster carers continue to be actively involved in foster care recruitment.

The Fostering Team has worked hard to support and retain our current carers; however over the next few years some older established carers may consider retirement and there are always life events that contribute to all carers re-considering their fostering career. In order to ensure Sefton can continue to provide for children looked after to remain living within their local community we need to provide sufficient local placements to meet their needs. The Fostering Service will continue to work on recruitment and retention of carers.

Continued areas for development regarding recruitment

We have continued to analyse the trends in the general population, current and predicted looked-after children populations, and compared this with the foster carers available. Having compared the children placed with independent providers against those with in-house foster carers there is little difference in terms of age gender or needs overall, although there is a tendency for those placed with IFA carers to be older. The Service has continued to develop performance data to ensure we can better analyse trends or track specific data about recruitment activity that is required to be undertaken to ensure we have

- Emergency provision
- Respite carers
- Parent and child assessors
- Carers from ethnic minority backgrounds
- Carers with skills in managing challenging behaviour

The carers we are focusing on recruiting need to be able to care for:

- Teenagers in general
- Teenagers with emotional and behavioural difficulties
- Asylum seeker children
- Children of all ages with disabilities and/or special educational needs
- Teenagers who offend – short-term emergency
- Parent and child placements (short-term assessment and longer term support)
- Children of all ages from ethnic minority (Eastern European) backgrounds

We need to continue to provide a comprehensive, high quality fostering service to Sefton’s residents, which is sensitive to the needs of all, recognises differences and is reflective of ethnic origin, culture, faith, gender, disability, economic and sexual orientation.

To increase placement choice we are continuing to recruit a number and range of foster carers to meet the diverse placement needs of our looked after children/young people.

One area for development is the development of a specialist fostering ‘teen scheme’ for the most traumatised, challenging and vulnerable young people. We are currently exploring the potential of an enhanced payment that will be competitive with Independent fostering providers and increased levels of support including specialist support and training. Once this scheme is implemented we will be looking to recruit up to 10 families under this scheme which will enable looked after children who have particularly challenging needs the opportunity to live in a stable home environment if unable to live with birth family.

The scheme will hopefully attract foster carers to care for older children and young people, this will put Sefton in direct competition with independent fostering agencies that have traditionally focussed on this age range but will also incur savings by using our own foster care provision, with the advantage of keeping young people within their area.

Panel Activity

The table below indicates the numbers of reports that have been dealt with by the Panel compared to the previous four years.

Assessments of foster carers	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Assessments of foster carers	50	44	57	61
Number of connected persons assessment	30	30	45	47
Number of Mainstream assessments (* see para below)	20	14	12	14
Annual review of Foster Carers	29	23	23	23
De-registration of Foster Carers	35	25	28	12
Other reports, i.e. approval changes, termination of assessments,	13	21	34	25
Extension for the time limited connected person reports.				

There continues to be has been an increase in the numbers of assessment reports coming to panel. This is related to the continuing increase in connected person (family friends) reports. There has been no decrease in this area of assessments and this continues to increase.

The numbers of mainstream assessment reports approved 14 the previous year to 12, this past year a trend that has now been evident over the past four years. Connected person reports continue to exceed the mainstream applicants (47 compared to 14) and remain easily the largest element of the Panel’s work.

Allegations

There have been 8 allegations against foster carers all investigated through Sefton's designated officer. No foster carers were deregistered and further training had been recommended.

No complaints have been made this year about the fostering service.

Placement Breakdowns from 01/04/2016/31/03/2017

- The total number of placement breakdowns was 30.
- 19 of these were the result of behaviour by young people aged 11-17. This included aggressive behaviour, missing from care, criminal activities, and alcohol/drug issues. It is recognised that these behaviours are often a symptom of their pre-care experiences and we work hard to avoid acting in a way that disrupts young people's positive behaviour and support networks.
- 2 young people requested to be moved from their placement
- 7 children were removed from kinship care due to safeguarding concerns which included a sibling group of 4; all 7 children were in care proceedings during this time.
- 1 child moved from their foster carer due to concerns regarding the standard of care.
- 1 child moved from their foster carers who were unable to complete adoption introductions.

The Service recognises that due to pressure on placements young people are sometimes placed with foster carers who are outside of their 'comfort zone' and more importantly their skills and abilities, in caring for the older child. Despite these breakdowns the Service does provide appropriate placements for over 50

teenagers (the same number as independent fostering agencies) and we are hopeful that the Teen Scheme will further address this issue by making sure that children with additional needs can be matched with carers who have the level of skill and enhanced support to sustain their placements.

Foster placement breakdowns can be incredibly challenging and distressing for all those involved. As a service we are aware that there is sometimes a gap in provision for our most difficult to place young people but we are committed to improving the level of support to both young people and their carers.

As corporate parents we recognise the number of unnecessary placement moves it is therefore a priority as stable and nurturing are thought to directly influence the child/young person's ability to recover from the abusive and neglectful experiences they have previously had.

Other pressures on the Service

The number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) looked after by all local authorities in England has more than doubled from 2,050 at 31st March 2014, to 4,210 at 31st March 2016. A relatively small number of local authorities (largely the "port authorities") have been supporting a disproportionately large number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children. To address this, the national UASC transfer scheme (NTS), which is a voluntary scheme, came into force on 1st July 2016. It was predicated upon each local authority which included Sefton accepting UASC up to 0.07% of its child population (equating to 36 children in Sefton) in order to ensure a more equitable distribution across the country. If every local authority were to reach this proportion of UASC, that would equate to 8114 looked after by local authorities in England. There is no clear indication from

Government as to whether or by when this ceiling might be met.

In reality, there has not yet been a significant transfer of UAS children to Sefton. Of four children identified at the end of November 2016, 1 turned out to be over 18, 1 had a relative in another area and was helped to be reunited with them, and 2 were accommodated with Sefton foster carers. To-date the 2 girls are making excellent progress and are fully supported by their foster carer to engage in education and integrate into the local community.

Looking Forward 2017/18

- Recruiting foster carers who are able to offer permanent placements for children/young people whose plan is not to return to family.
- Adapting training programmes to support foster carers to offer permanence for children/young people into adulthood and beyond.
- Supporting colleagues in teams around the service in relation to specific issues which can impact on placement stability such as Delegated Authority.
- Working together to undertake life story work.
- Introducing "End of Placement" letters and we will support foster carers to complete these when a child/young person leaves their care.
- A significant and unpredictable amount of assessment capacity is taken up with the approval of connected person's, often for temporary periods during proceedings. We need as a whole service to understand if we are getting this area of practice and decision making right.
- Continuing to recruit to our priority areas.
- Implement our teen scheme
- Run information drop-in sessions during the day with our skilled foster carers
- Reviewing and recruiting to the short-break service as we are aware this is not consistently able to meet the needs of the children/young people requiring a service. In addition to targeted recruitment we will be assessing, training and development needs to better address this issue.
- Implement specific training to assist foster carers to successfully manage teenage placements.
- Responding to the needs of unaccompanied Asylum seeking children/young people following recent government announcements.
- Implement a mentor scheme specifically for kinship carers.

