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Foster with Bury

Annual Report 2023 - 2024



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Bury
COUNCIL

Introduction

The Fostering Service in Bury is located within Children's Social Care Service, the overall management responsibility lies with the Head of Service - Corporate Parenting. The Fostering Service comprises of sub teams, now overseen by three permanent Team Managers and two Advanced Practitioners to support staff and service development. The 'sub teams' are

1. Connected Carer Assessment and SGO support team.
2. Mainstream Recruitment and Marketing team.
3. Foster carers support and supervision team.

Overall, the Fostering Service undertakes a range of functions and duties required under the Fostering Service Regulations England 2011 and Fostering Service Regulations England 2011 amended by the Care Planning, Placement and case Review Fostering Regulations 2013.

Fostering continues to focus upon and drive forward quality and performance. The latter being reported at monthly Performance Management meetings. Managers conduct monthly audits using a Fostering Audit Tool which are moderated by the Head of Service for Corporate Parenting. Additionally, Managers complete dip samples of case files to support staff in maintaining excellent files and evidencing manager oversight.

The Fostering Service has fourteen Social Workers and two Fostering Support Workers who offer practical support to Carers and Special Guardians. The Fostering Service also has a Senior Business Intelligence & Data Collection Officer who manages carer payments and monitors data and a Recruitment Lead and Recruitment Assistant whose focus is to drive forward Bury Fostering Recruitment campaigns and respond to initial enquiries.

In the past year the recruitment lead has also taken on the role of Liaison worker for the Mockingbird project as some of her previous role is being absorbed into the new Regional Recruitment Hub.

The main development in the service over the last year has been the implementation of Mockingbird and the service has one constellation up and running and a second in development.

Placement Searches & Placement Data

The Fostering Service also carries out placement searches with the Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) market through the North-West Placement framework contract, when we are unable to identify a placement for a child within Bury's cohort of Foster carers. This is carried out by the Fostering Duty worker. The reduction in available foster carers nationally, particularly for older children and those with more complex needs, has made this role more challenging. ents, their likes, hobbies, their wishes etc as well as information from their current

carers regarding caring for the child; these additional materials are then attached to the referral document. The approach has needed to be more creative and flexible in attempts to secure appropriate matches.

The number of children placed in Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA'S) at the end of the reporting year was 87. This number remains reasonably constant around this figure. The Fostering Team work hard to decrease the use of IFA placements and match children to local Bury foster carers wherever possible. There is the significant added value of Bury children being placed with Bury carers and us being able to maintain a tight knit fostering community for them and also to offer more timely support.

In Bury, 16 Care leavers live with their former foster carers under a "Staying Put" arrangement at the end of March 2024. This is a slowly increasing number which is positive as ideally young people would not be moving out of foster care at 18.

Foster Carer Ambassadors

There are a group of Foster Carer Ambassadors who are all Foster Carers themselves and are certainly best placed to share information about Fostering with Bury as well as answering any questions people may have.

The Ambassador Scheme recruits approved foster carers who have a range of experience and skills within their fostering role. During the year there has been some changes to the personnel involved and some new ambassadors have now been recruited. They have been instrumental in increasing the profile and brand of Bury Fostering and going forwards they will play a key role in the Regional Recruitment Hub by visiting potential new carers at the Initial Visit Stage. The service has continued to use the Ambassador's skills to 'buddy up' with other foster carers providing a further layer of support.

Recruitment & linked GMCA Fostering Development

The past year has seen some very significant developments in regional working to promote fostering for local authorities and Bury Council have been at the fore of this development with their Head of Service sitting on the strategy Board and playing a key role in developing 3 areas of work.

These are:

Mockingbird Implementation – Bury Council had already committed to develop Mockingbird in Bury and as such were already well on the way to establishing the first constellation when GM secured finances for further developments across the whole of GM. This means that Bury will benefit from funding to set up further constellations. The first constellation is very new and yet already proving how successful this model is likely to be.

Regional Recruitment Hub – The Regional Hub will become the main point of entry for those enquiring about fostering. This will be based in Rochdale, one of Bury’s neighboring Local Authorities. The expected date for this to Go Live is June 17th 2024. A considerable amount of work has been done to try and increase enquiries through a more Regional Approach. This is currently government funded so there is much new recruitment activity that complements that done by Bury Council.

Fostering Unfiltered - GM foster carer recruitment campaign. This is largely a digital campaign and is a commissioned piece of work. There have been some teething problems with this but it has recently been refocused and will have a local as well as a Regional angle to it.

In addition GM produce monthly data which aids in developing and benchmarking foster care services across the Region. There are plans to hold a Regional fostering conference for carers and Bury foster carers are engaged in regular meetings to advise on development of the Regional work.

Marketing and Recruitment

2023/24 saw a significant amount of social media activity. In addition, there were two foster carer ambassadors that did a minimum of 3 community events per month in venues such as supermarkets, Bury Market, and local libraries.

There were also quarterly information events at John Lewis (Trafford Centre), attendance at Manchester Jobs Fairs (in February, July and October) and there was a 2 day recruitment event in October at The Arndale Centre, Manchester with colleagues from the other Greater Manchester Local Authorities.

The local & more regional events throughout 2023-24 generated 12 enquiries, 3 converted to IV and were invited to apply but 0 did.

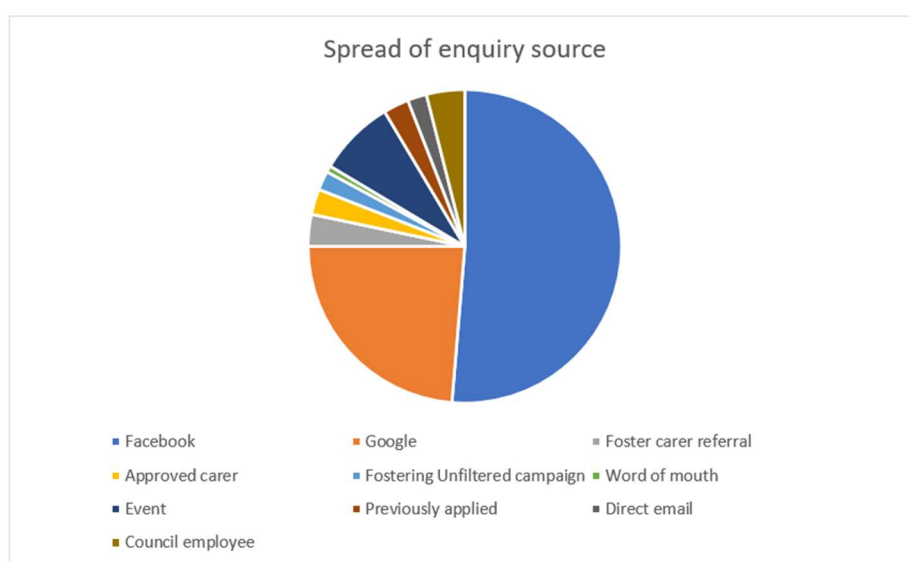
The 3 charts below show the source of each enquiry and those that converted to approvals. Those introduced by other foster carers is by far the most successful with 2 out of 5 being approved (40% conversion rate). Facebook generated most of the enquiries but did not result in approvals. It is good to see 6 Council employees enquiring to foster and of those 2 were approved (33%).

In the coming year there is a plan to consider engaging foster carers in events to which they could bring friends or family and combine an enjoyable evening with a call to foster given evidence suggests foster carer recommendations from those who already foster is the most likely to result in new approvals.

Whilst it is not possible to evidence this, it is likely that the improved financial offer to Bury foster carers has aided with both recruitment of new carers and retention of existing carers.

Breakdown for enquiry source:

Facebook	78
Google	36
Foster carer referral	5
Approved carer	4
Fostering Unfiltered campaign	3
Word of mouth	1
Event	12
Previously applied	4
Direct email	3
Council employee	6
Total	152

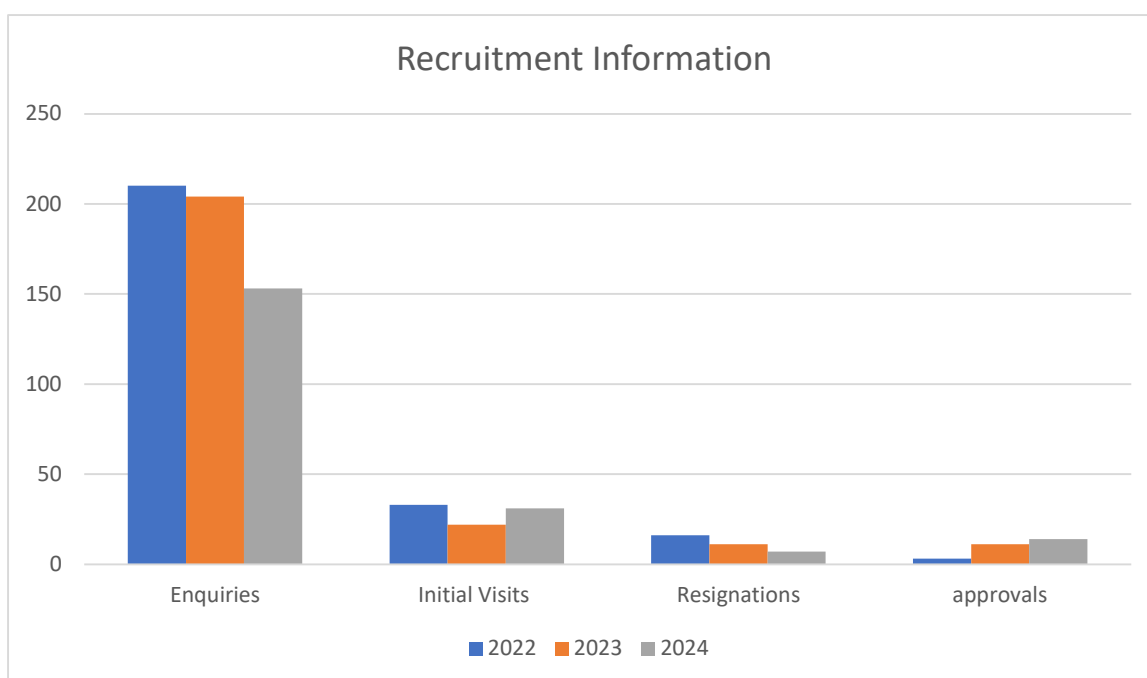


Conversion for enquiry source:

Source	Number	Conversion
Facebook	78	3 converted to IV, 2 invited to apply following IV. 0 applied. 0 approvals
Google	36	12 converted to IV, 11 invited to apply following IV. 6 withdrew before applying. 5 applied. 1 withdrew in Stage 1. 4 progressed to Stage 2. 2 approved and 2 withdrew during Stage 2.
Foster carer referral	5	4 converted to IV, all invited to apply following IV. 2 approved. 2 expected to be approved July 2024
Approved carer	4	3 converted to IV, all invited to apply following IV. 1 withdrew at stage 1. 2 approved.
Fostering Unfiltered campaign	3	0 to IV

Word of mouth	1	0 conversions
Event	12	3 converted to IV, all 3 invited to apply. 0 applied.
Previously applied	4	4 converted to IV, all invited to apply. 2 progressed to stage 1 and 2. 1 approved. 1 expected to be approved in July 2024.
Direct email	3	0 conversions
Council employee	6	2 converted to IV, both invited to apply and progressed to stage 1 and 2. 2 approved.

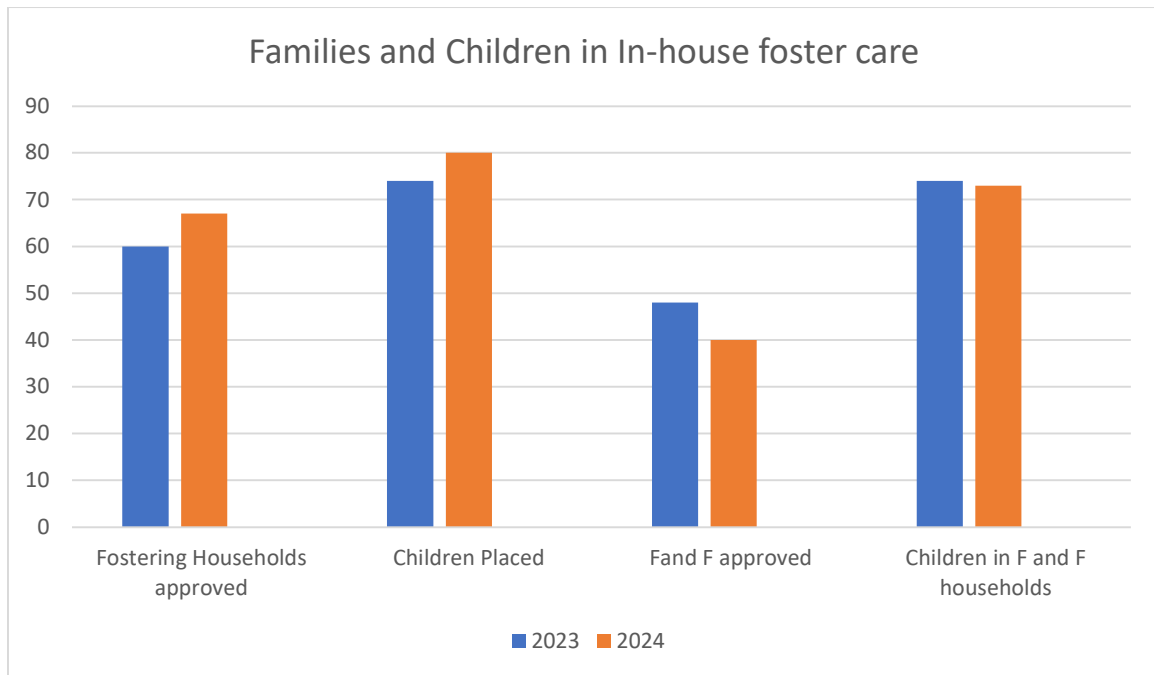
The chart below shows enquiries, initial visits, resignations and approval data for the last 3 years. As can be seen this last year saw less overall enquiry numbers but a much better conversion rate with higher numbers of initial visits and approvals.



The graph below highlights that there has been an increase in the number of approved households this year and due to a low number of resignations this has led to a net increase in fostering households of 7 and an increased number of children placed with Bury families.

Lower numbers of resignations is also positive and the Managers and Head of Service go and see all carers who are expressing dissatisfaction or a desire to cease fostering to address any issues as early as possible.

Connected carer families are not recruited as such and there has been a slightly reduced number of these approved this year compared to last year.



Supported Lodgings Providers

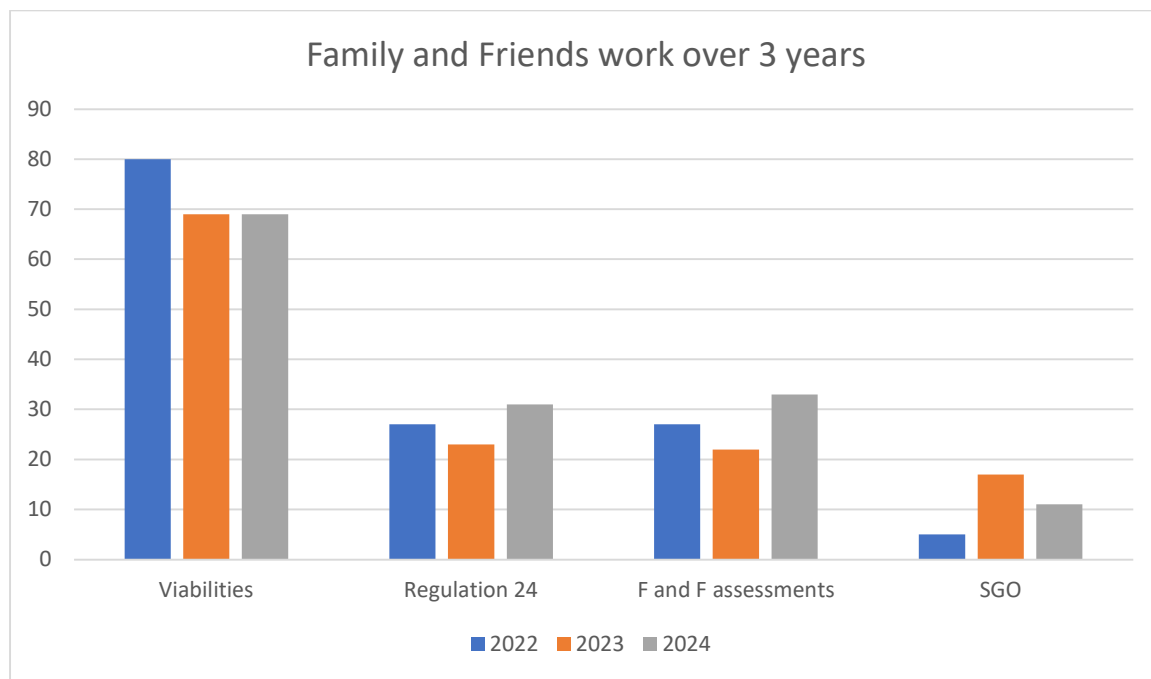
The Fostering Service continue to develop and recruit to the Supported Lodging service, The scheme is overseen by the Team Manager on the Support Team with support from a social worker.

Supported Lodgings provide a placement option for young people who are not ready to move to community based semi-independent living.

On 31st March 2024 there were 4 approved supported lodging carers. In the past year it has also become a requirement for this service to be registered by Ofsted in order to place 16 – 18 year olds and this is awaited.

The scheme is designed to help young people develop life/semi-independence skills by enabling them to experience being part of a supportive living environment. It is anticipated that they can benefit from a level of freedom and responsibility whilst still sharing a home and time with an adult/s who are positive role models.

Connected Carers



The Fostering Service undertakes work with Connected foster carers. These are the extended family members and other connected people with existing or prior relationships with a child. This area of activity continues to be busy with family safeguarding looking to promote placement with families by identifying them early through family group conferencing and supporting them to care for connected children.

This can at time mean identifying more flexibility in our approach and support for the families within fostering assessments to enable our children to have permanence plans with connected carers. There is a North-West Leads forums to share practice, experiences and updates as there is a close working relationship with the legal team and the Fostering Network to support in achieving permanence with connected carers for children.

The recruitment and assessment process differs only slightly from that of general foster carers, but still requires full compliance with the Fostering Regulations 2011.

Training and Retention of Foster Carers

The Fostering Service provides ongoing training for foster carers as required under the Fostering Regulations and the majority of foster carers have completed their Training Standards Development as required under these regulations. Where they have not done so a support worker can offer advice and assistance to ensure this is done. Additional training has been provided throughout the year on a variety of topics including attachment, managing

behaviour, keeping children safe and health needs. The training schedule is set in advance each year for the 12-month period and includes in person and online training. Support groups also continue to run however these are less well attended than focussed training sessions.

All carers are encouraged to attend training in therapeutic parenting including parenting with Pace, Beyond Psychology training in the impact of trauma as it is accepted that children who have experienced trauma require parenting in a particular way.

Where carers struggle to attend or access training then supervising social workers can deliver some of this in person. The extent to which carers are accessing training is reviewed in each supervision and in the annual review.

This year the team have worked hard to keep resignations to a minimum and carers considering retiring or moving agencies are visited by managers and senior managers to try and address any issues or offer additional support. The 7 resignations have all been for personal reasons and not due to concerns about the service. This number is significantly less than in previous years.

Foster Care Annual Reviews

All approved Foster Carers are subject to the fostering review processes to assess their ongoing suitability to continue to foster as set out in Fostering Regulations and Standards. This is also their forum to discuss the review period openly and have an arena to discuss their successes and challenges. Feedback from children, household members and other professionals working within the care planning remit for our children is obtained for these reviews, resulting in the chair of the meeting being able to have a clearer, wider picture of how the review period has been for the carers.

The Fostering Service has one Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) who chairs the foster carer reviews and produces an IRO report with recommendations. Her role is to provide oversight into improving carer compliance, carer and child experiences as well as ongoing practice improvement within the service.

The Fostering Team Manager has held regular meetings with the FIRO to discuss any challenges, significant practise issues as well as improvements to streamline the Fostering Review process. These meetings have been extremely useful and have enabled us to identify key issues to the review process and look at ways to improve this.

In this reporting year a total of 123 Foster Carer Annual Reviews were held.

There were 41 'Mid-point' FIRO discussions.

The FIRO makes a recommendation about the carers continued approval at the annual review meeting. If it is found that foster carers are not fulfilling their role appropriately then the annual reviews can be presented at Bury's Fostering Panel for further scrutiny, oversight and to provide a recommendation about the foster carers suitability to continue to foster.

A FIRO annual and 6-month report exists to inform practise development.

Fostering Panel

The Fostering Panel is an independent body which is required under Fostering Regulations (Regulation 23) and makes recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM). A stable panel has been maintained in this reporting year which is positive for the service.

The Panel Advisor role is shared between 2 Fostering Team Managers and they work closely with the Panel Chair.

The panel considers all full assessments for applicants, whether these are general or family and friend fostering applications. They also consider first Foster Carer reviews and reviews where there have been allegations or significant changes.

The panel is also notified of all Regulation 24 assessments and considers requests for Regulation 25 extensions to provide the assessing social; workers with an additional 8 weeks to complete the assessments where the emergency approval remains in place. This is used particularly where checks have not been returned in time for panel.

The panel provides a quality assurance role to the Fostering Service. The fostering panel is legally required to oversee the conduct of assessments and to give advice and make recommendations on matters or cases (Regulation 25 (4)). National Minimum Standards 14.2 require that *'Panels provide a quality assurance feedback to the fostering Service provider on the quality of reports being presented to panel'*.

Panels are held twice per month so that delays are kept to a minimum.

All panels have been conducted in person with an option for carers to attend virtually if necessary although people are encouraged to attend in person.

The quoracy for panels is 5 members with specific make up but panel often operates with more. Bury has a core of regular panel members who attend on a rotational basis, and careful skill is used to ensure that there is a balance of expertise, independence, and gender. There are usually six panel members invited to each panel to allow for an emergency occurring on the day. Bury has a strong and committed panel membership which allows for the panel to function very effectively.

Bury's fostering panel is usually scheduled monthly for the year. The fostering 'Agency Panel Advisor' also now also plans the agenda with the administration manager to ensure that sufficient time is allocated for each item two weeks before any panel.

The panel members should be gender balanced and reflect the ethnic diversity of the children needing foster care and their local communities. The Chair and the Agency Advisor have attracted more diverse panel members and in recent months there have been some new appointments who have increased the breadth of experience and diversity. They have also

appointed a new Vice Chair. It is particularly beneficial that there are now 2 care experienced people regularly on the panel including the panel chair.

All panel members receive an annual appraisal and at least one annual training event.

Permanence

Amendments to the Care Planning and Fostering Regulations (2015) have established that long term fostering is a legally defined permanence option for children in care. In Bury the Fostering Service want to offer every child in a foster placement the opportunity to achieve permanence and security. The Fostering Service has committed to work on the processes to permanence, which are now incorporated into its Care Planning procedures, Review Meetings, Fostering Panel functions and the Corporate Parenting 'Permanence Strategy' being developed.

Permanent and long-term placements are considered and managed through a matching process whereby the child's social worker and the foster carers supervising social worker complete comprehensive matching reports which are then presented to a Bury's Permanence Panel. Permanence Panel commenced in June 2020 as an extension of Bury's Fostering Panel provision. Monthly meetings were scheduled throughout the pandemic to ensure there was a focus on children and young people achieving permanence. This change has improved the quality of the long-term matching process and formalised it somewhat, ensuring all views are captured and that the decision making is appropriate. The recommendation of the match heard at panel is agreed by a Strategic Lead or Service Manager. The process of long-term matching provides permanence for children in foster care whilst providing them with a clear sense of belonging to the family they are a part of. In this reporting period there have been 15 children matched to their respective carers at Permanence panel.

The Fostering Service makes an overall contribution to care planning for Bury's Children in Care. All foster carers are subject to regular supervision from a qualified and experienced Supervising Social Worker to ensure care plans are being met effectively and children are and continue to be safeguarded.

Special Guardianship Orders and Support

The numbers of Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) made in 2023/24 has slightly reduced on the previous year provides permanence for children and young people.

May suggest that SGO numbers are stabilising after a number of years of increase year in year.

The service encourages connected carers to apply for an SGO wherever appropriate as this provides stability and permanence for children.

The SGO support service sits under the connected carer Team Manager. This is logical as the carers have often been assessed in that service so the carers are known to that team.

There is an SGO Family Support worker who is very experienced and skilled with a background in education and also qualifications in therapeutic parenting.

The family support worker provides the direct SGO support overseen by an Advanced practitioner. The SGO support service includes training specifically for SGO carers, leading a variety of support groups for SGO carers which include art therapies and undertake assessments of need where appropriate.

In addition Special Guardians can access the fostering training offered to all carers.

Our Family Support Worker whom has a key role in the Post SGO Support has provided a huge amount of support to our Special Guardians and prevented many placements breaking down and the children and young people returning to looked after care.

There is a plan to do some consultation with SGO carers to consider how this service is developed alongside the new guidance from the DfE to improve services for SGO carers.

Support for Bury Children and their Carers

The Fostering Service works closely in partnership with the Care and Support Service (CASS) the Adoption Service and the Safeguarding Teams to ensure children in placement have all their needs met. A Legal Gateway and Resource Panel is held weekly and has acted as a conduit for more integrated planning of placements, this also ensures that appropriate support is provided to ensure placement stability.

To ensure placement stability there is a close and effective working relationship with the Virtual School and all fostered children of statutory school age have a PEP The Virtual Head is very engaged in educating and supporting foster cares and in addressing outstanding educational needs.

All foster carers are provided with the equipment they require when a child is placed, and they are allocated a supervising social worker on their approval. The supervising social worker (SSW) visits to support, oversee and supervise the foster carer to look after the child in placement. The SSW will discuss any issues the foster carer may face in caring for the child; including re-parenting strategies or in respect of moving the child on to adoption, another placement or working for the child to return to their birth family. Additional equipment was provided dependent on need to ensure that carers had

The Foster Care Association

This was reestablished in late Summer 2023 after the previous chair resigned This group is facilitated by the carers themselves and this provides another forum to provide direct feedback to the service and raise any concerns/compliments.

The group regularly invite the Head of Service to their meeting and a chronology of comments and actions is maintained. This has developed into a positive working model between the foster carers, the Association and the Management team.

Placement Stability

The fostering service, along with the children's teams, work proactively to identify issues of placement stability early and then consider what support can be offered to resolve these issues.

Any placement disruption (unplanned end) is a concern for the service, and all unplanned placement endings are subject to a disruption meeting. The process for disruption meetings has recently been reviewed and the Independent Review Team Managers will be chairing these. Learning from these will be analysed every 6 months to ensure themes are addressed and issues addressed.

There is also a process having 'Placement Stability' meetings aimed at supporting placements that are beginning to struggle in an attempt to prevent the disruption.

These meetings are utilised to explore what could be impacting upon potential placement breakdown and what additional support needs there could be to ultimately stabilise a placement. These have been very effective and support stabilising a placement and avoiding breakdown. The final disruption meetings for placement breakdowns ensure that lessons can be learnt for the future. Attendees can be varied to meet the needs of the young person involved,

Fostering Network

All approved Foster Carers in Bury are members of the Fostering Network, and can seek independent, confidential advice and support on fostering matters and legal issues. In addition to this, they have access to an Advice and Mediation Worker. The advice and mediation service offers confidential independent advice and support to foster carers. The advice and mediation worker offers training sessions to foster carers on "Dealing with allegations."

By purchasing this service Bury is acknowledging that foster carers are an essential part of the professional team around the child and recognising that foster carers are uniquely vulnerable and may at times require additional independent support. Although the service's main role is supporting foster carers through allegations, the following examples demonstrate the huge variety of ways in which the advice and mediation service has been used this year:

- Assisting foster carers to reflect on their practice and relationships with local authority staff to ensure the best and safest care for looked-after children. This has resulted in retention of foster carers.

- Assisting foster carers to have their voice clearly heard, both through report writing and representations at the fostering panel and the Independent Review Mechanism Panel (IRM).
- Liaising between authority staff and foster carers where procedures have been unclear or foster carers have been too worried about approaching staff themselves.
- Providing a counselling type service to foster carers to enable them to voice frustrations and concerns, either assisting them in assessing their situations more clearly often avoiding official complaints or clarifying instances where this would be a useful route to follow.
- Providing an information and consultancy service to social work staff. It can be seen that this service assists local authorities in retaining foster carers in these times of an acknowledged national shortage of foster carers, and also, where appropriate, helping to avoid a costly application to the IRM. (*Taken from Fostering Network report 2021*)

Allegations

12 Bury foster carers were referred to the Local Area Designated Officer (LADO) to assist with oversight and investigation into concerns raised by children in foster care. 5 of these were contacts only where the LADO deemed there not to be a role for him.

Of the other 7 (5 households), 2 were connected carers, one was a foster carer but the concern related to another child in her care and 2 were from mainstream foster carers.

Of those 7, 3 were unsubstantiated, 2 unfounded and 2 were substantiated after further investigation.

4 allegations related to physical incidents and the 2 that were substantiated related to emotional abuse by virtue of shouting and making a derogatory comment to a child.

All complaints are followed up with a lesson's learnt process to determine how we can improve services.

None of the carers stopped fostering due to the allegations but 2 of the connected carers are no longer foster carers due to young people moving out.

For all the carers, training was identified as a need to assist them in managing challenges better. The service is considering how more carers are engaged positively in training to equip them to foster.

Complaints and compliments

During the year there were 2 formal complaints made about the fostering service.

One was made by a prospective foster carer who had been in assessment and the process was terminated.

The Head of Service went to see this couple as the complaint was about the decisions of the fostering team manager.

Their concern was about the reason for stopping their assessment and this was complex due to the nature of the information shared with the Local Authority. The couple wanted to feel heard and felt that the way messages had been communicated were insensitive and in that regard there was some acceptance that this did feel insensitive.

Following the complaint being addressed they acknowledged that they had felt heard and appreciated that.

The other is an ongoing complaint made by a Special Guardian and this relates to his need for intervention and assessment and a delay in responding to a stage 1 complaint. This is currently at stage 2.

Independent Review Mechanism

One family (connected carers) decided to appeal the proposal not to approve them as foster carers. This appeal was delayed in being heard and was eventually heard in February 2024 by the IRM. The IRM upheld the local authority view and subsequently the decision was made by the Agency not to approve them as foster carers. There were some points of learning which were taken back to a full team meeting.

Voice of young people in foster care

Young people are consulted as part of each foster carer annual review and as part of any placement disruption meeting. Wherever possible foster carer supervisions include a conversation with the young person placed so that their current views can be recorded. Young people have access to the advocacy service should they wish to pursue this and there are examples of times when areas of contention have been resolved using this service to ensure placements continue.

Young people have recently been involved in the re design of the information leaflet for young people in foster care and the consultation document.

The Head of Service has attended the Children in Care Council to listen to young people's views around foster care issues as they related to the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

Priorities for the coming year

The priorities and aspirations for children and young people in care are:

- Increase the number of Bury foster placements available

- Continued oversight of Permanence Tracking – Fostering Managers attending monthly tracking meetings to ensure children and young people are matched long term to their carers at Bury Matching Panel if this is in line with their care plan.
- To provide placements that achieve timely permanence and security, in particular maximising the number of children who achieve permanence through Special Guardianship.
- Continue to engage with the GMCA work - Greater Manchester Fostering Community of Practice
- Continue Reviewing the training offer to support and equip carers with the skills to meet the varying needs of children, in particular adolescents and to ensure greater uptake of available training by foster carers.
- Increase placement sufficiency to support children and young people to remain within their foster placement post age 18 whenever possible. (Staying Put). Review the Staying Put policy so it is clearer what support carers will receive.
- Complete the Fostering Panel recommendations contained within the fostering panel annual report 2023/24.
- Continue to drive forward quality assurance and practice improvements across the service.
- Continue with successful and innovative ideas for on going foster carer retention
- Continue with monthly groups supervision sessions for staff as well as monthly SW Practice Forums to ensure standards remain consistent and high within the Service.
- Strengthen the reach and impact of the FCA