# Notes and actions– South East regional fostering leads meeting

**Date:** 12 April 2021 10.30-12 noon **Chair Carol Cammiss** DCS Wokingham

**Attendees:** Catherine Seiderer (Brighton and Hove), Natalie Bugeja AfC (Windsor and Maidenhead), Clark McAuley (Surrey), Spencer Duvwiama (Wokingham), Sarah Smith (Hampshire), Hilary Sparling (Medway), Helen Field (Southampton), Jackie Clark (Portsmouth), Liz Shields (Buckinghamshire), Keith Langley (West Berks), Sam Horton (Hampshire), John Donnelly (Brighton and Hove), Sam Howard (Bracknell Forest), Sivay Heer, Deborah Price (IoW), Jackie Giles (Oxfordshire), Carol Norrington Beard (Surrey), Lynne Tripp (Hampshire), Yemi Ukwenu (Slough), Dawn Harding (Hampshire)

**ITEM 1: Introductions and minutes of last meeting:** The minutes of the last meeting were agreed subject to the amendments made by CC.

**ITEM 2: Specialist respite carers:** SH from Hampshire requested a discussion item on how different LAs are approaching recruitment of carers for planned respite for children with disabilities (who may be living at home or in foster placements). Have LAs had success with targeted recruitment? Is there a bespoke assessment tool? What has worked well? Would a regional targeted recruitment drive or pool of carers be helpful?

Southampton – HF: noted that, like Hampshire it is something they need to pursue as well in Southampton. Southampton have one carer who is an approved foster carer who is paid slightly differently and only does specialist respite for children. This sort of capacity is managed independently of the fostering service.

Medway – HS: is doing a similar scoping piece of work identifying the children that would benefit. On the basis of the scoping a business case is being put together to secure the funding, it is a piece of work we are doing currently,

Oxfordshire - JG – Oxfordshire have undertaken digital advertising for short break carers, and they also have workers in the fostering teams with a specialism in disability. In the recruitment service there is someone that takes on assessments for carers of CWD, and there is a separate meeting for children who need respite carers. There are a proportion of children with mobility issues, people come forward but they often don’t have suitable premises. We work with districts to see if they can identify an appropriate property. We recruited a former teacher from a specialist school to undertake this sort of role. Oxfordshire is currently looking at permanently identifying a property that people can move into.

LZ Bucks – Situation in Bucks is similar to Southampton – There are 5 short break carers on different schemes, paid differently. We are looking to consolidate it a bit and get a better understanding of needs. There is a gap in current capacity to provide short breaks for children with ASD. A lot of people who come forward are interested in supporting children with physical disability, but we need carers who can support children with complex ASD. We haven’t had a lot of success.

KL West Berks- we have a number of carers who can provide planned short breaks for CWD. We had to review payment, they used to get an hourly rate, which when you worked it out was not in line with our policy or minimum wage requirements. They now get the equivalent of a fostering plus carer. There are models of full-time employment for these sorts of carers which we are aware of (e.g. Swindon), but we are struggling too with respite carers for children with ASD. We’ve done bespoke recruitment campaigns for specific children where we are looking for long term support, and that has been a success in the past. We haven’t been able to identify specific properties and that is an interesting idea it might be worth exploring.

**ITEM 3: Mystery shopping**

Brighton and Hove shared the findings of the 3rd wave of mystery shopping. In their scenario it was a person who did not currently have a spare room and did not have experience of overnight stays but would have a spare room in the future. Only one LA asked about the mystery shopper’s motivation, and there were varying views of the lack of experience overnight stays. Across the board the higher performing LAs and IFAs made the caller feel valued and reassured. Brighton and Hove colleagues noted that they learned a lot not just about recruitment in other LAs, but also support. That initial contact and relationship and how you are made to feel is so important. Things Brighton and Hove will be taking away include: sending a letter to referees to thank them but also to see if they are interested.

When asked the difference between LAs and IFAs, some LAs went into excellent detail about the difference – not for profit, duty to place children in-house first, one team – however there was no consistency across the board and it was not proffered unless callers asked directly. For someone so early on in their fostering journey, at information seeking stage, the difference should be made clear, whether they ask or are even aware there is a difference.

It wasn’t clear for all local authorities that they were in fact the local authority. In some cases, research and further reading needed to be undertaken to make sure. Our callers had been told to contact the local authority so they persisted, but an average applicant may just proceed with the most prominent option (IFA). Some local authorities seemed to work with and own non-profit IFAs. The distinction was confusing, and the relationship was not clearly explained.

In all the high scoring calls, the key determiner was enthusiasm. The LAs / IFAs that scored highly all had highly engaging, friendly, enthusiastic, polite and knowledgeable staff members answering the call – who weren’t put off by lack of spare room or lack of childcare experience. They proceeded with the call in the same way as they would with a ‘hot prospect’ – and as a result nurtured and ‘banked’ the enquiry for the future.

**Action:**  Jackie Clark Portsmouth to lead wave 4 of mystery shopping to be presented in July

**ITEM 4: Practice sharing Windsor and Maidenhead**

NB, head of fostering from AfC explained how Windsor and Maidenhead’s fostering service is delivered. There are two fostering teams one in Richmond/Kingston and one in Windsor and Maidehead. Each team has a team manager, ATM, 8 social workers and 2 part time admin. Each team supports assessments, annual reviews, connected assessments, and SG. Over the last year the teams have been brought together much more across the localities to that skills and mentoring can happen. This has enabled some tangible practical improvements – e.g. respite during holidays is now across all 3 LAs.

Current practice is significantly hindered by a quite out of date case management system and they are in the process of moving to liquid logic. AfC has particular strengths in its carers, and forums which are held every 6-8 weeks. There are also a number of support groups – e.g. birth child support group. In AfC, similar to some but not all LAs, foster carers have access to all the training that staff do. The virtual school goes across three LAs.

One thing RBWM is particularly proud of is high retention, and no resignations this year. Our carers are very loyal and have kept on going no matter what happened through the pandemic. We offer 10 days paid respite for each carer. Can be taken by foster carers in one big lot or spread out, can be day and night respite. 82% of carers attending training, which is very much up on previously, due to the fact it is all online. We’ve kept support groups, forums, face to face visits. We gave Christmas and Easter gifts because we didn’t have events.

Using this approach about 60-70% of placements are in-house in Windsor and Maidenhead, overall across the LAs it is 55% in house. Caseloads are about 13 cases including assessments, although they are hoping to bring that down a bit to provide more therapeutic support. The carers are not as diverse ethnically as AfC would like, but they reflective of the area.

They have done a big push to recruit people from different ethnic, faith and sexual orientations. Adverts and posters have been changed this year. There are about 87 children in care in RBWM. A lot of carers are wanting respite which AfC is now providing from Richmond and Kingston.

The biggest change they have been seeing is in the upswing of reg 24, connected assessments- around 25 cases of this type across the 3 LAs. A lot of the efforts of the team are relating to connected assessments/SG. RBWM are also seeing higher than usual numbers of private fostering arrangements, who had to stay longer because of lockdown and placements in boarding school being held up.

Our reflection is that Covid if anything has led to a small increase in recruitment/assessment activity. Furlough has made people pursue it, although these are at a very early stage.

**Action:** All to share the amounts they recommend foster carers provide children in terms of pocket money and savings if you are willing to share

**ITEM 5: Feedback and issues for escalation to DCSs, future agenda items**

CC noted that there has not been a DCS meeting since the last fostering leads meeting and she will escalate and share the issues around delays in court and medicals impacting the pipeline. LS noted that since the letter from British Medical association it has improved medical timeliness in Bucks.

Future items on the agenda suggested as:

* Anti-racism – tools, and anti-racism in assessment and supervision and support. What we can learn from each other. CC noted she had contacts with an organisation who may be able to facilitate/lead a session at a future meeting
* Online medical – for Foster carers we rely on a medical done in paper forms – can we create a portal.
* Strategy for recruiting more diverse panels
* Performance over last 12 months.

**Action: CC to share key themes at DCS meeting**

**Action: LS to send letter re: prioritisation of medicals to RE to circulate to the group**

**AOB:** CM asked if regional colleagues would be willing to share end of March 2021 data to enable LAs to benchmark fostering performance. Most colleagues confirmed they would be happy to do this.

**Action:** CM to circulate Surrey’s benchmarked data, RE to collect from other LAs and share

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**July meeting agenda:** Oxfordshire to share practice, Portsmouth to share wave 4 mystery shopping findings.

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LAs still to share practice: Wokingham, Surrey, Kent, Portsmouth, Milton Keynes, Reading, West Sussex, Medway

LAs who have done mystery shopping: Hampshire, West Berks, Brighton and Hove, Portsmouth.

Meetings for 2021: All to be held via MS Teams:

* July 19 10.30am-12 noon
* October 4 10.30am-12 noon