

**WORCESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
FOSTERING SERVICE**

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

February 2008

Agreed :

Anne Binney, Head of Integrated Services to Children, Young People and Families

Signature : Anne Binney

Date: 7th May 2008

Councillor Elizabeth Eyre, Lead Member for Children's Services

Signature : Elizabeth Eyre

Date: 31st March 2008

Contents

	Page No.
<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Management Structure</i>	5
<i>Services Provided</i>	6
<i>Aims</i>	10
<i>Objectives</i>	11
<i>Principles</i>	12
<i>Standards</i>	13
<i>Staffing Details</i>	14
<i>Number of Foster Care Households</i>	15
<i>Children Placed</i>	15
<i>Complaints and outcomes</i>	15
<i>Fostering Services procedures and processes</i>	17
<i>Appendix 1 - Finance details</i>	21
<i>Appendix 2 - Staff details</i>	23

INTRODUCTION

This statement of purpose has been prepared in accordance with Regulation 3 Fostering Service Regulations 2002 and based on Standard 1 of the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services under section 23 (i) of the Care Standards Act 2000.

The aim of Worcestershire County Council's fostering service is to offer an appropriate in house foster placement to all those looked after children in Worcestershire for whom this is the agreed plan.

Worcestershire has a large group of committed and experienced foster carers. Mainstream foster carers remain with the county council for an average period of approximately 10 ½ years.

The number of Looked After Children cared for by the county was 469 at the end of January 2008, of whom 224 were placed with local authority foster carers, including relative/friend carers.

The two monthly Fostering Panels are now chaired by the same independent chair. The Panels Manager continues to offer professional advice.

All mainstream foster carers have been paid the National Minimum Allowance since April 2007. They also receive a fee according to our payments for skills scheme; this offers payment on a three level system, plus a contract foster care scheme. Competency based assessments are carried out on all non-relative and friends carers.

Children's social care teams seek to place children with extended family members wherever possible and consequently the number of relative and friend assessments has increased, although because of natural throughput the number of relative/friend carers at any one time remains stable. These carers are assessed differently (using the BAAF Form F2) and are not part of the payments for skills scheme.

The Contract Foster Care scheme continues in its aim is to recruit carers to provide placements on a time limited basis for those children and young people who present particular challenges and who may otherwise have been placed in expensive out-county units. At the end of December the scheme had 5 full time carer households providing a total of 10 placements, and recruitment is ongoing.

The support care scheme, which provides short breaks to children from the community in an attempt to sustain their placement with their family, is directly managed through family support and overseen by the fostering service.

As part of the support strategy for carers, regular foster carer team meetings are held, and a county wide foster carer forum, to which all carers are invited, meets quarterly. This meeting is attended by the Operational Manager, Fostering, in order to offer carers a direct link to the senior manager for the service.

The Family and Carer Support Service (FACS), a 24-hour support service, is available through the Emergency Duty Team from 5pm to midnight Monday to Friday and throughout the weekend. Support is offered to carers by telephone or with a home visit if necessary.

The Fostering Service is managed by the Operational Manager, Fostering, who is part of the Looked After and Adopted Children Management Team.

Functional teams operate as follows:

- Adoption & Fostering Development Team: recruitment, preparation training, assessment and post approval training.
- Foster Care Teams North & South: supervision and support of foster carers, assessment of and support to Relative and Friends carers, family finding and Post Allegation Reviews.
- Placements/Panels Team: placement service and panel management.

The two Foster Care Teams (North & South) and the Placements/Panels Team are co-located in Bridgewater House, Worcester, alongside the Adoption Teams. The Adoption & Fostering Development Team continues to be located with the Training Section. The Operational Manager is located on the County Hall campus, Worcester.

As a result of further developments and in particular the ability to remotely access files and other systems, staff are able to operate according to principles of mobile and flexible working.

The North and South Foster Care Teams and the Adoption & Fostering Development Team operate a skill mix approach to their work with the use of social work assistants and recruitment workers to support the work of qualified social workers. Further development is underway to extend support to carers by the use of 'placement support workers'.

The handbook for foster carers is titled 'Fostering Services' to reflect the fact that it includes more than simply an A – Z guide, but is generally referred to as the Foster Carers' Handbook. This includes the A – Z guide, policies and procedures on fostering services available to carers and social workers and other policies, guidance and information particularly relevant to foster carers.

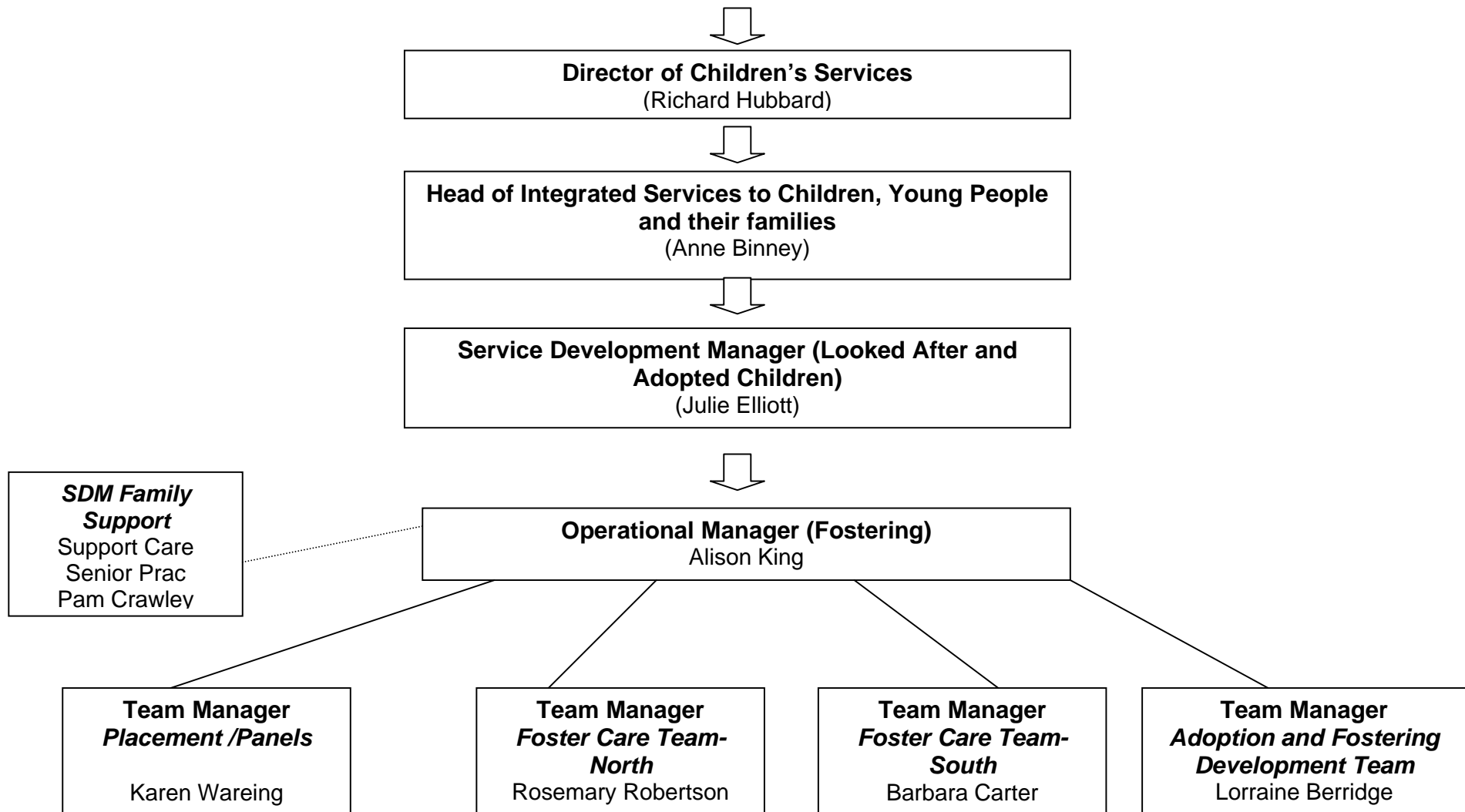
The Handbook is constantly under review and is updated as necessary; regular mailings are sent to foster carers to alert them to changes in procedure and to offer other information to assist them in their task. A more major overhaul and update is planned for 2008.

The Children's Services Directorate has a strong commitment to Performance Management and produces a quarterly report including much information about child protection and looked after children. This includes information about foster carers, ie numbers of enquiries/assessments/approvals, with timescales, numbers of reviews completed and whether these have been carried out within statutory timescales, information about placement requests and outcomes and information about available and unavailable placements.

The County Council's Corporate Parenting Group, which comprises county and district councillors, meets monthly with the Service Development Manager for Looked After and Adopted Children and continues to create close links with the fostering service. Councillors have some experience of attending foster carers' groups. This programme is to be re-launched in May 2008.

An annual inspection of the service was conducted by Ofsted in December 2007. The overall outcome for the service was deemed to be 'good with some outstanding practice'. The support around issues of health and education, and the practices with regard to consultation with young people, was judged to be particularly strong.

MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE
Chief Executive
Worcestershire County Council
(Trish Haines)



SERVICES PROVIDED

The fostering service provides:

For potential foster carers:

- A rapid response to enquiries from potential applicants from Worcestershire and the surrounding areas.
- Pre-approval preparation courses which ran four times during 2007.
- Assessment using a competency framework.
- Approval through the panel process.

For relative & friend applicants:

- Priority is given to the placement of children within their own families/friendship networks wherever possible
- Interim approval within 6 weeks for those carers with child/ren placed
- Approval commensurate with the timescales laid down through the operation of the Public Law Outline for applicants where the child/ren is not yet in placement.

For all approved foster carers, including relatives & friends:-

- Financial Support (see Appendix 1)
- Practical support, including domestic help and ironing services where appropriate
- Regular supervision and support by a fostering social worker
- Regular Team meetings.
- Quarterly Foster Carers' Forum, attended by Operational Manager
- Post approval training; current development of the training programme to ensure compliance with the Children's Workforce Development Council standards.
- Quarterly newsletter.
- Annual review.

- Support from Integrated Services for Looked After Children
- Access to Advice and Mediation Service managed by the Fostering Network.
- Access to Family and Carer Support Service out of hours through the Emergency Duty Team.

Placement service:

- A central 9am – 5pm duty service, managed through the Placements Team, receives service requests from Worcestershire children and families social workers for all types of placements.
- A search of 'in house' foster carers and/or the county council's children's residential units is undertaken for all children referred.
- Where the placements team cannot identify an 'in house' placement which meets the need of a child or young person, authorisation will be sought for a search for a placement through an independent fostering service provider or residential provider. The search is conducted by the Placements Team.

Family finding:

- When a longer term or permanent placement is sought on a planned basis, the fostering service together with the child's social worker are responsible for the matching and linking process. A fostering social worker is allocated to the task of identifying a place for that child.

Support care:

- This service, managed through Family Support but overseen by the Fostering Service, provides short breaks to children from the community in order to avoid the need to look after the children on a full time basis.

Meeting the needs of children from ethnic minorities:

- The fostering service aims to meet the needs of looked after children in need of family placement from minority ethnic groups, bearing in mind that the largest number of black and minority ethnic (BME) children are of dual heritage and many have spent their early childhoods in white birth families. We are also mindful of the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children. It is recognised however that the minority ethnic population within

Worcestershire is comparatively low (4.4% of under 18s) and that children from such groups are over-represented in the looked after population (11%). (Performance Management report October – December 2007)

- Our recruitment materials reflect the diversity of Worcestershire population. However, it is not always possible to make appropriately matched placements from within our own resources. In such cases we would investigate the option of a placement with a bordering local authority.
- Where we are unable to match children with carers from a similar ethnic or cultural background, and decide to place trans-racially given other factors such as proximity to birth family, we would if necessary provide extra support to the placement to ensure that the child's cultural and religious needs were met.

Meeting the needs of children with disabilities:

- Many children with a range of disabilities including very complex needs are successfully catered for within our fostering service.
- A proposal to extend the Contract Foster Care scheme to include at least one placement for children with disabilities is currently under consideration.
- There is a specialist post (currently vacant) within the Adoption & Fostering Development team with specific responsibility for recruitment for children with very complex needs.
- The Short Breaks Service for children with disability is not within the fostering service, but provided on a contractual basis by Barnardo's.

Commissioning:

- A draft strategy which will include a refreshed approach to commissioning with independent providers, with a focus on placements for children from the BME community and children with disabilities, is currently at the planning stage.

Planning for children:

- The fostering service contributes to planning processes for individual children through liaison with children and families social workers, adoption social workers and residential support workers.

- The service contributes to the strategic planning of Children's Services through membership of various working groups. The Service Development Manager (LAAC services) is a member of the integrated children's services senior management team which has a strategic function. The Operational Manager is a member of the Children's Services Integrated Operational Managers' Group, the extended leadership team within the integrated services function block as well as the LAAC managers' group, and contributes to strategic as well as operational planning.
- The Operational Manager Fostering is the current chair of the Looked After Children Placement Management Group, which meets fortnightly with the overall aim of ensuring that services work together with children young people and their families to ensure that looked after children are returned to their birth families as soon as this is compatible with their safety and welfare.
- The Looked After and Adopted Children's Service develops its own annual business plan, based on the Corporate, Directorate and Head of Service Plan. Each team then has its own annual business plan which contributes to the Directorate's business planning process which is regularly monitored to ensure objectives are on target.

AIMS

Our aim is to provide a suitable fostering placement for every looked after child from Worcestershire for whom it is deemed appropriate. Placements will be with carers who are well selected, prepared, supervised and supported. Children in foster care will have an experience of family life, which promotes their physical, social, emotional and intellectual well being and maximises their life chances. They will be assisted to make the successful transition to adulthood.

The fostering experience should be a positive one for both looked after children, their families and foster carers and their families. Foster carers will work alongside others to achieve the care plan agreed for each child.

We aim to deliver this service in an efficient and effective manner, which maximises outcomes within the resources available.

OBJECTIVES

- Recruit and retain sufficient foster carers to increase the resource base to enable us to provide in-house foster placements for up to 56% of looked after children (85% of LAC in foster placements or placed for adoption) (Commissioning Strategy 2006-7). Target – 20 new carers in 2007 – 8.
- Recruit and retain fostering staff at a level sufficient to enable the service to operate effectively.
- Provide an effective placement service which responds swiftly to referrals and makes the best use of available resources.
- Provide regular supervision to carers to protect the interests of children in placement, and ensure that each foster carer delivers care that is safe and secure for the children they look after.
- Develop carers to their maximum potential through supervision, training and support.
- Provide a full range of support to carers to promote placement stability and retention of carers.
- Ensure the service meets national minimum standards.

PRINCIPLES

- Meeting the needs of looked after children is the primary purpose of all activities of the fostering service.
- Staff in the service will act at all times in accordance with the County Council's code of practice.
- The service will respect, value and promote diversity.
- The service will promote equality of opportunity and anti oppressive practice with regard to children and their families, foster carers and staff.
- Service users, i.e. children and their families and foster carers, will be consulted and their views taken into account in planning at an individual and service level.

STANDARDS

- All aspects of service to comply with National Minimum Standards.
- All foster carers, except relatives and friends carers, to be assessed using a competency framework.
- All foster carers to be offered pre and post approval training. This is mandatory for all non-relatives and friends carers. Relative and friend carers are offered all post approval training.
- All carers to be supervised at least 3 monthly, with a face to face contact at least monthly, unless agreed with team manager and noted on file that a lower level of contact is acceptable. All visits to be recorded. Carers unallocated due to staff shortages will be contacted regularly but will not receive monthly contacts.
- The usual ratio of full time equivalent fostering social workers to fostering households to be 1:15, taking into account other commitments for example assessments of relative/friend carers.
- All staff to receive supervision at least monthly, with an annual Staff Review and Development appraisal.
- One supervision file per team and 5 foster carer files to be audited bi-annually by the Operational Manager.

STAFFING DETAILS (as at 01/01/2008)

Management Team

Service Development Manager Looked After & Adopted Children – Julie Elliott.

Operational Manager Fostering – Alison King

Adoption and Fostering Development Team Manager – Lorraine Berridge

Fostering Team North Manager – Rosemary Robertson

Fostering Team South Manager – Barbara Carter

Placement/Panels Team Manager – Karen Wareing

Senior Social Worker North Foster Care Team – Debbie Carroll

Senior Social Worker South Foster Care Team – Jan Warner

Senior Social Worker Private Fostering – Rose Parker

All of the above SSW posts are half time.

Senior Social Worker Contract Foster Care – Richard Stevenson

Senior Social Worker Adoption & Fostering Development Team – vacant

Both the above posts are full time.

All team managers and senior practitioners hold a social work qualification and have many years experience of social work in children and families work, particularly family placement. The Operational Manager Fostering completed the Chartered Management Institute Diploma in Management in December 2007. Two team managers are currently undertaking the Diploma course.

Social Workers in the Service.

There are 20 whole time equivalent social work posts (excluding SSWs) in the fostering service.

Within the last year we have benefited from the appointment of a newly-qualified social worker to a bursary post in the South Foster Care Team, and we look forward to welcoming a further newly-qualified worker on completion of their training in June 2008.

Support Staff

There are:

2 customer service advisers (Placement team).

2 social work assistants (North & South Foster Care Team).

1 Marketing Manager (Adoption & Fostering Development Team)

1.5 recruitment support worker posts. (Adoption and Fostering Development Team).

Page 15 of 24

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4 team clerks, 1 in each team.

0.5 clerical assistant (Adoption and Fostering Development Team).

1 panel administrator(Placement team)

2 x 0.5 Personal Assistants to SDM and Operational Manager

Vacancies

As of January 2008 there are currently 2.5 social work vacancies, 1 social work assistant vacancy and 1.5 admin vacancies in the service.

Panel

Panels are chaired by an Independent Chair contracted to fulfil this task.

Independent social workers

We commission independent social workers to carry out specific pieces of work where appropriate.

NUMBER OF FOSTER CARE HOUSEHOLDS

In January 2008 there were 184 registered fostering households.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN PLACEMENT

In January 2008 there were 234 children in placement.

NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS AND OUTCOMES

Complaints are monitored by means of monthly meetings with the Consumer Relations Officer, and reported on for the fiscal year period. The number of complaints associated with either foster carers or children in foster care for the year 06/07 is as follows:

Complaint received from	Number of Complaints	Number upheld	Percentage resolved in 28 days	Number on-going at 31/03/2008
Children	4	0	100%	2
Carers	8	3 + 1 partially upheld	87.5%	2
Other professionals	0	0		0
Parents of children	1	0	100%	0
Others	1	1 partially upheld	100%	0

All complaints in connection with the fostering service are monitored by the Operational Manager, Fostering, and the fostering managers' group regularly considers the learning points and any actions which need to be taken.

FOSTERING SERVICE PROCEDURES AND PROCESSES

Recruitment

Foster carers are needed from all age groups, ethnicity and geographical areas within the county. The Adoption and Fostering Service has a structured recruitment strategy which is updated on a regular basis. A number of targeted marketing initiatives are used, concentrating on media activity for both advertising and editorial. Ongoing communication links have been made within the local media, which has encouraged the maximum use of editorial articles about events, foster carers and other interesting news stories throughout the fostering service. Advertising has a specified budget, and local newspapers and radio stations are used for promotion.

Other recruitment activity includes the provision of dedicated recruitment stands within targeted areas of the county, tied in with specific campaigns for example Fostering Fortnight. These are followed up with the distribution of posters and leaflets within shops and other consumer focused outlets.

All enquiries are directed to the Adoption and Fostering Development Team (AFDT) which has a free phone number. Enquiries are monitored and evaluated on a monthly basis. An initial information pack is sent following the enquiry. If a reply is received indicating continuing interest an primary assessment is carried out which may involve more than one home visit. Following this, statutory checks are initiated and the applicant(s) invited to a preparation group which is based on "Skills to Foster". At the same time a competency-based assessment is carried out by an AFDT social worker.

Approval process

All applications to foster are considered by one of the two fostering panels, South Worcestershire or North Worcestershire. Each panel meets monthly and is chaired by an independent chair contracted specifically for this role. The Placement/Panels Team manager is the professional adviser to the Panels. A panel administrator organises and minutes panel activity.

It is an expectation that all applicants attend panel, except relative/friend carers where the application is for interim approval. The panel's recommendations are made to the Operational Manager Fostering who makes the decisions on behalf of the local authority.

Applicants are informed of the decision in writing and required to sign the Foster Care Agreement, if approved.

Training

Following approval there is a clear expectation that foster carers will attend core training. Progression to Levels 2 and 3 of the payment for skills scheme is dependent on core training being completed and a continuing commitment to developmental training. Core training includes managing behaviour, safer caring, child protection, first aid, contact, health & safety and valuing diversity.

Developmental training includes courses on bereavement and loss, men in foster care, managing stress, education issues, drugs and alcohol, preparation for independence, safe and positive handling. These courses are delivered through the Adoption & Fostering Development Team.

Foster carers can also access courses delivered by the Integrated Service for Looked After Children (ISL), for example on emotional health of looked after children, child development, effects of adverse environment on developing children, attachment and parenting skills. Courses are also available to foster carers through the Training and Development Section – in this way they can train jointly with social workers.

Courses are publicised through the fostering newsletter which appears quarterly with additional updates as necessary.

Current training has been mapped against the CWDC standards and a programme to ensure compliance is being developed.

Currently relative/friend carers are welcome to attend training courses, but this is optional; however the CWDC standards will require the Fostering Service to deliver training to all foster carers.

Supporting carers:

All fostering households are allocated a fostering social worker, however, on occasions, due to staff shortages some households remain unallocated temporarily. In this situation the team manager holds responsibility and will follow the protocol for support to foster carers in the absence of a social worker.

We have benefited from extra resources from April 2007 to enable us to further strengthen support to carers by the appointment of social work assistants within the two foster care teams, a regular carers' convention to include training and an overnight event and practical support to sustain challenging placements.

The role of the fostering social worker with regard to foster carers allocated to their workload is:-

- To engage in regular supervision with foster carers and be responsible for the management of the foster care resource provided by those carers.
- To ensure that the foster carer(s) is supported through the provision of written information, access to training and carers' groups, access to the child's key worker, encouragement to participate in planning for the child, respite where appropriate.

It is expected that fostering social workers will visit at least monthly. In some situations e.g. a very well established stable placement, visits may be less frequent but the rationale for this should be stated on the foster carer's file. Newly approved foster carers will normally be visited more frequently. All contacts with foster carers are recorded and discussions in relation to each child in placement are recorded separately.

Additional support to foster carers is provided through the Integrated Service to Looked After Children (ISL) which is a multi-agency, holistic service, jointly provided and managed by Health and Children's Services. ISL works in partnership with all relevant agencies and services to ensure that looked after children gain maximum life chance benefits from educational opportunities, positive health and well-being, community and leisure opportunities and stable social care.

Specific provision includes individual consultations to foster carers to support them in understanding and managing the child in placement, training on attachment, Webster Stratton parenting skills course and other training. Additionally ISL staff are available for telephone consultation and home visits where appropriate, particularly following consultations.

All looked after children are monitored in terms of their education placement. The Community & Leisure worker provides signposting and information on leisure activities.

ISL Team 2 comprises social workers, clinical and educational psychologists, a community psychiatric nurse, a youth and leisure worker and a specialist nurse for looked after children. It works to develop, strengthen and mobilise networks that support children and their carers through both direct work and training. It forms part of local CAMHS provision dedicated to the needs of looked after children.

ISL Teams 1 & 3 are made up of teachers and teaching assistants. They aim to promote inclusion within education, raise attainment and prevent exclusion thereby promoting placement stability.

Looked after children at Key Stage 4 are offered laptops and can access Edulink; there is an expectation on foster carers to support children and young people in their use of IT to further their education.

These integrated approaches to meeting the needs of looked after children are underpinned by regular liaison at service management level within Children's Services and with health service colleagues. This aims to promote access for fostered children to universal as well as specialist services.

All foster carers are expected to attend foster carer team meetings which are held 4 - 6 weekly. A minimum of 75% attendance will be expected for progression; however we understand that there are some situations which preclude carers from attending training (eg care of very young child) and take account of this. The purpose of team meetings is information dissemination, consultation, support and training.

When a foster carer's own worker is not available the team will provide support in office hours.

Out of hours support is available through the Directorate's Emergency Duty Team which can access the Family and Carer Support Service between 5pm and midnight Monday to Friday and 9am to midnight Saturday and Sunday.

Respite is arranged for carers by their fostering social worker when appropriate e.g. to enable carers to take a holiday, meet family commitments or support a particularly challenging placement. This is done by negotiation and agreement with the child's social worker. This may include some day care where a child is out of school for a prolonged period.

Foster carers may also access the regional Advice and Mediation Service provided by Fostering Network and funded by a group of neighbouring authorities. Any carers subject of allegations are strongly encouraged to use this service. All carers, on approval, are given membership of Fostering Network and receive the Network's literature and other services as appropriate.

The service ensures that foster carers are aware of issues around bullying and know what steps to take.

Foster carers and fostering staff attended the recent launch of Worcestershire's E Safety Pledge and work is ongoing to ensure that all carers are engaged with this initiative.

The Fostering Service contributes to the induction of newly qualified children's social workers, and social work assistants. Ongoing liaison between the fostering social worker and the child's social worker is crucial to the support for the child and carer.

Reviewing procedures:

We review all foster carers annually. A review is also carried out following an allegation or serious incident.

The review is undertaken by one of the Fostering Panels in any of the following circumstances:

- First review following approval.
- Proposal for permanent link.
- Following a serious allegation and reassessment.
- Following any significant issue or occurrence.
- Major change to approval category.

Other reviews are carried out at local level, by the Foster Care Team Manager. The outcome of these reviews are noted and monitored by the appropriate Fostering Panel.

As part of all reviews feedback is sought from the foster carers, the fostering social worker, foster carer's children, children in placement and social workers for any child in placement during the relevant period.

Minutes from all reviews are agreed by the Operational Manager Fostering.

Appendix 1 **Finance details**

All foster carers are paid a weekly age related Foster Care Allowance to cover the costs of looking after the child/ren. This was increased from 1st April 2007 to the national minimum allowance according to government guidelines. They also receive amounts to cover holidays, birthdays and festivals and costs for special activities, e.g. school field trips.

In addition all foster carers other than relative and friends carers are paid a fee per child according to their assessed level of competence and experience.

The framework of the payment for skills system is as follows:-

- At approval all foster carers are appointed to Level 1 (unless they can demonstrate prior experience – see second bullet point): currently £71.68 per week per child.
- Applicants who have previously actively fostered for another fostering service provider within the past five years, and can demonstrate appropriate skill levels, can be considered for appointment to level 2 or 3.
- After a minimum of 3 years' active experience, foster carers can be considered for Level 2: currently £102.48 per week per child. A review will consider whether they meet the criteria and will make a recommendation about progression.
- After a minimum of 5 years' active experience, foster carers can be considered for Level 3: currently £130.76 per week per child. A review will consider whether they meet the criteria and will make a recommendation about progression.

In the case of a foster carer who does not continue to meet the requirements of Levels 2 or 3, a review may recommend a move to a lower level.

In the case of a foster care who does not continue to meet the requirements of Level 1, a review may recommend termination of approval.

Requests for progression through the levels are made to the Operational Manager, Fostering following a successful review. There is a clear process for appeal if the foster carer is unhappy with the decision.

The contract foster care scheme comprises 5 foster carer households providing a total of 10 placements for age range 4 – 17 years. These foster carers are paid £410 per week per child plus the foster care allowance.

In acknowledgement of the difficulties caused to foster carers by extended periods with vacant placements, a retainer of 50% of the fee is paid following the end of the placement for up to 8 weeks; for contract carers the retainer is the full fee for up to 2 weeks, with the possibility of payment for a further 2 weeks in exceptional circumstances. The retainer ceases when a further placement is made.

We also acknowledge the particular financial problems created for foster carers by an allegation of abuse which leads to placement being unavailable. We pay the full fee for all unavailable placements for up to four months from the date at which the placement became unavailable, with a discretion to pay a 50% retainer for a further four months in specific situations.

Extra finance is available to carers of children in receipt of higher rate DLA; such carers receive 1.5 x the weekly foster care allowance.

In certain specific situations the child care review may recommend that a child needs to be placed alone in a foster family. If this results in other placement(s) becoming unavailable 2 x the fee can be paid.

Payments for the support care scheme, which provides placements to children from the community in order to sustain their placements at home, are managed completely separately from payments to “mainstream” carers. These carers are paid as follows:

1 – 3 hours	£15
3 – 6 hours	£20
6 – 9 hours	£30
9 – 24 hours	£50