

“Is it easy? Not always...
...Is it worth it?
Absolutely”

Fostering Service

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June 2015



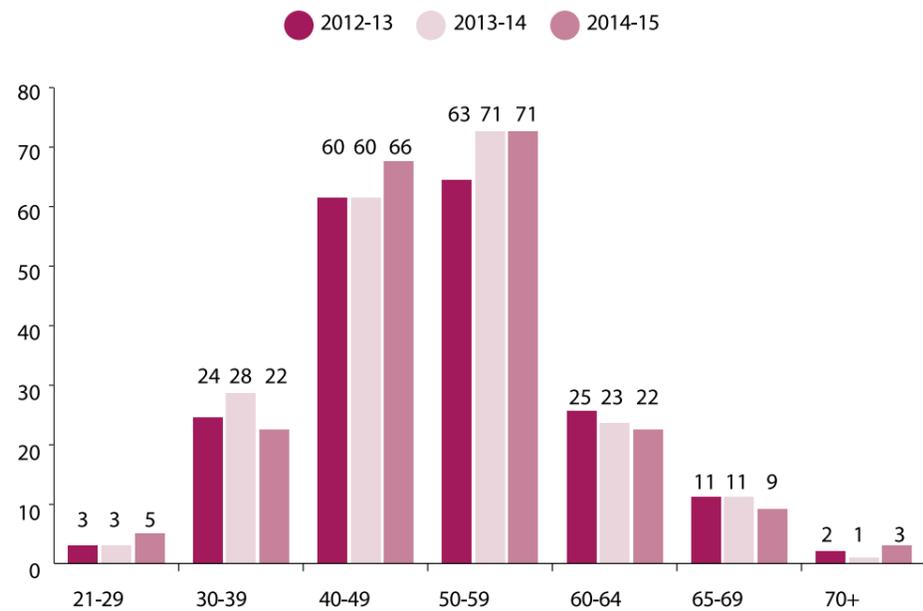
Fostering Service

Annual Report

foster for Gateshead



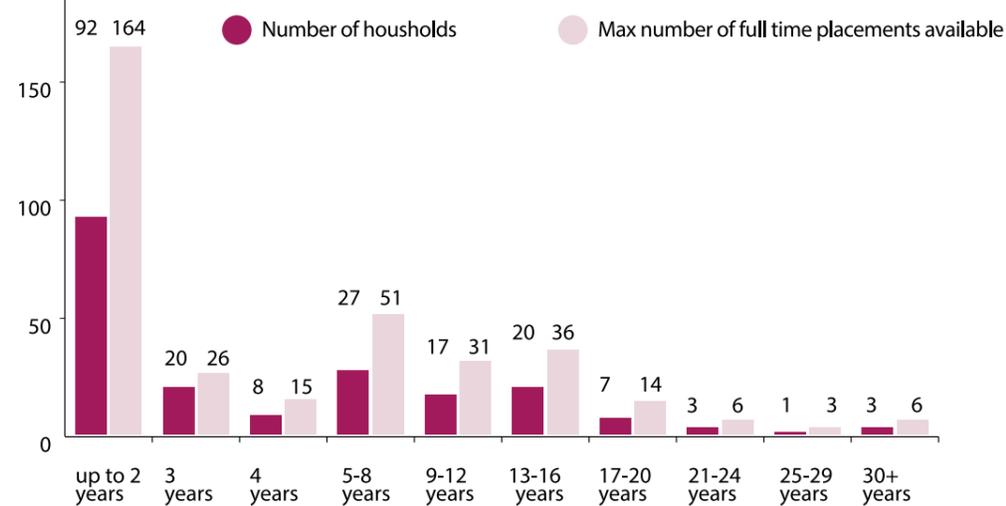
Age of main carer in fostering household: 2012-13, 2013-14 and 2014-15



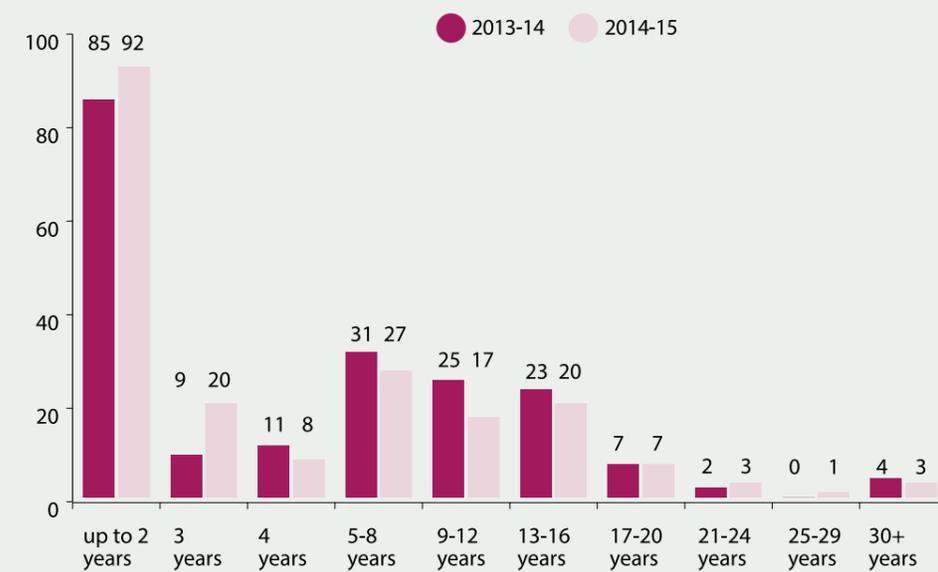
We continue to have a high proportion of older foster carers within the Service. 53% (105) of main carers within fostering households are over the age of 50 and currently provide approximately 56% of the potential available full time placements.

It is anticipated that over the next 5 years between 10 - 15% of these older foster carers will retire and therefore it is a priority for us to ensure that we recruit enough new carers not only to replace those retiring but also to increase the overall numbers of fostering households to between 200 and 230. This would provide a significant increase in placement choice and assist in reducing the numbers of children being placed in Independent Fostering Agencies.

Length of approval and available full time placements: 2014-15



Length of approval: 2013-14 and 2014-15



The Fostering Service has recruited a significant number of new foster carers in the last 5 years, with 46% (92) of fostering households having 2 years or less service with the Authority. This number also includes Connected Person carers for specific named children. We also have a cohort of very experienced foster carers, with 13% of our fostering households having over 15 years service. 3 households have been fostering for at least 30 years.

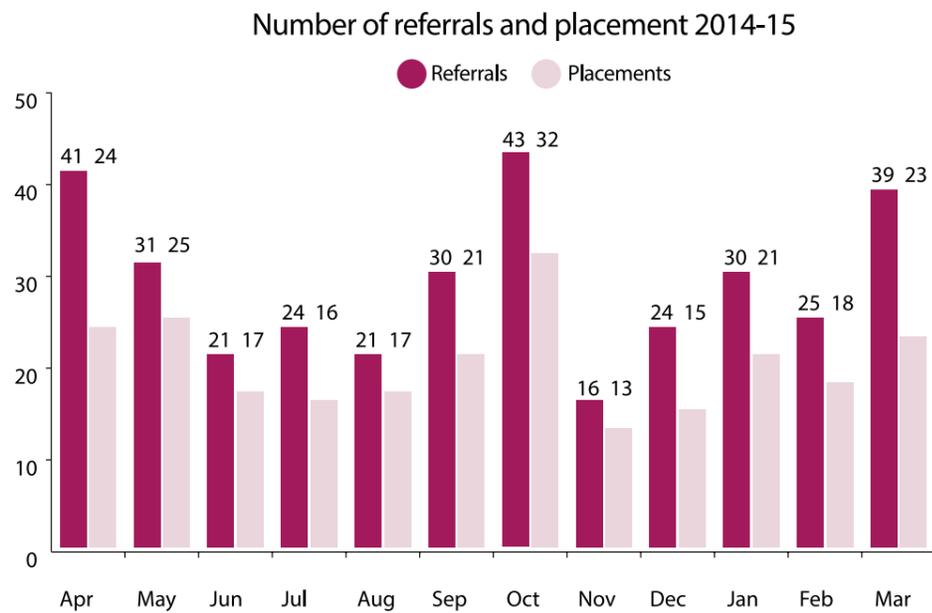
Connected person

This area of work continues to increase as more children are being placed with family members, and given the tight timescales for assessments panel are monitoring these closely to ensure compliance with the regulations. To ensure compliance with regulations, two members of the team are leading on this area of work.

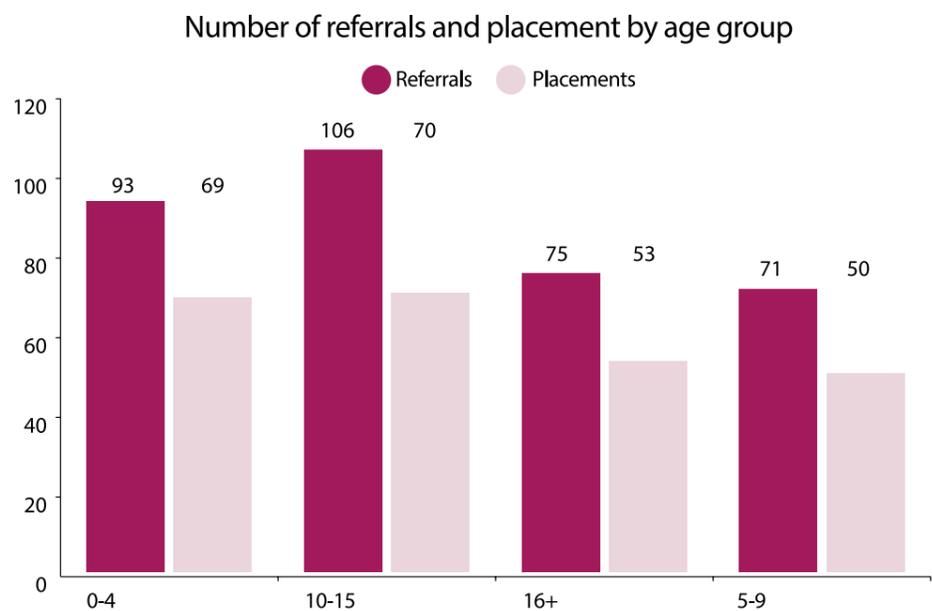
The service recognises that these carers are often dealing with complex family situations and have implemented special support groups for connected person carers. We have also developed strong regional links with the national support group Grandparents Plus, with two of our connected person carers being regional mentors for this group.

Referrals for Placements

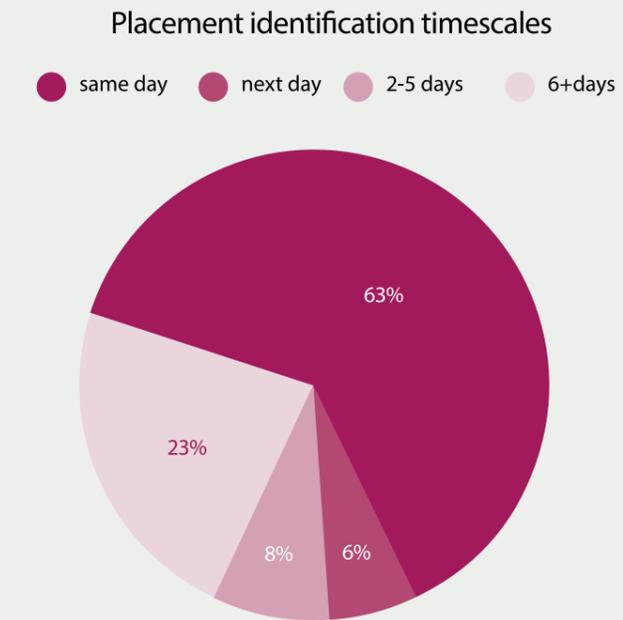
Gateshead's social work teams made 345 referrals to the Fostering Service for placements between 1 April 2014 and 31 March 2015. This is an increase of 7% on the previous year. Of these referrals, 242 (70%) placements were eventually made and 103 (30%) were withdrawn by social workers as alternative arrangements were made for the children in question.



April, October and March saw the highest number of referrals during the year. During April 3 groups of 3 siblings were placed. During October there were 2 groups of 3 and 4 groups of 2 and in March there were 3 groups of 3 and 4 groups of 2. The highest demand for placements during the year has been on the 10-15 years range, which influenced the marketing campaign to attract more carers for older children in particular teenagers.



The majority of placement referrals from social work teams are for emergency requests where placements are needed on the day that the referral is submitted, 63% are needed for the following day and 8% are needed within 2-5 days. 23% of referrals were needed after six days.



Over the year 31 sibling groups were referred to the Service for a total of 74 children. In general requests are primarily to keep siblings together. This is often difficult to achieve given the size of sibling groups referred and has resulted in a number of sibling groups being placed in Independent Fostering placements. However, in the last year there have only been 6 sibling groups placed separately, 3 of which were initially requested to be placed this way.

SIZE OF SIBLING GROUP	NUMBER REFERRED	TOTAL CHILDREN
1	144	
2	19	38
3	12	36

Independent Fostering Placements

Occasionally, due to the type of placements requested and the availability of our own foster carers we are unable to place children in house. In this event the Service commissions placements through external independent fostering agencies, which are more expensive than placing a child with our own foster carers.

All Independent Fostering placements are approved and monitored by the regular External Placements Panel which is chaired by Debra Patterson, Service Director - Social Work. Every effort is made to keep the use of these placements to a minimum, and also to return children to our own foster placements as soon as possible.

However if there are ongoing care proceedings the Service is often directed by Court to leave the children in their placements until these proceedings are concluded.

As of 31st March 2015, Gateshead had commissioned Independent Fostering Placements for 22 children. Of the 16 new placements commissioned during the last financial year, six of these placements were needed for teenagers with complex and challenging behaviour where there were no in house foster carers with the necessary skills or space to accommodate them.

Several sibling groups were also placed in Independent placements where the requirement from social workers was to keep the children together and it was not possible to do this within the Service.

However, out of the 16 new Independent Placements commissioned between 1st April 2014 and 31st March 2015, 12 of these also ended during same period. Targeted recruitment has taken place over the year in an attempt to increase the number of teenage placements Gateshead can offer.

To the period 31 March 2015 Independent placements ended for a total of 25 children which helped the Service's aim of reducing Independent placements.

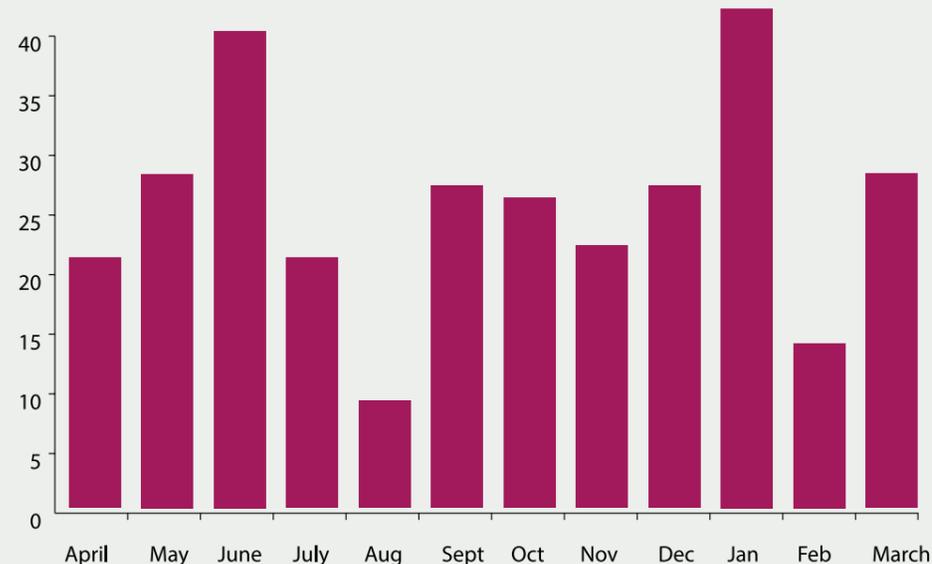
REASONS FOR PLACEMENT ENDINGS:	NUMBER OF CHILDREN
Rehabilitated Home	3
Adopted	4
Placed with Family Members	2
Moved to Residential Placement	2
Moved to Supported Lodgings/Independent Living	2
Carers transferred to Gateshead Fostering	7
Moved to In-house Placement	4
Refused Placement	1

Recruitment and Retention

Enquiries

In the year to 31 March 2015 the Service received a total of 309 enquiries, a decrease of 35% on the previous year. The number of fostering households approved at panel has however increased from 37 (2013-2014) to 41 (2014-2015).

Enquiries per month for 2014-2015

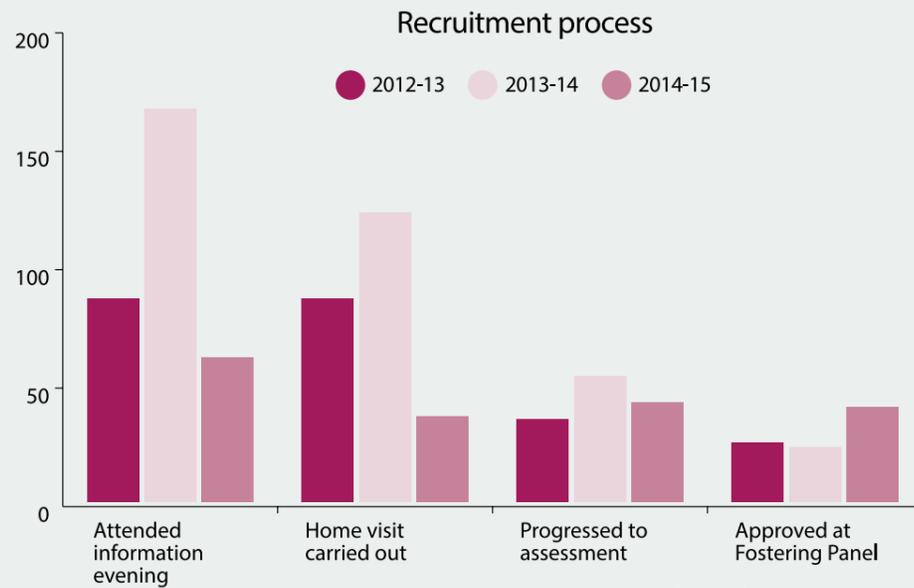


Conversion Rate

The Local Authority Fostering Service benchmark for 2015 shows that nationally 11% of enquiries proceed to approved foster carers. The Service has a higher than average conversion rate of 13%, so although there have been less enquiries, a higher percentage of prospective carers have been approved.

Recruitment process

The number of families attending information evenings and being offered a home visit has significantly reduced this year. This in part is due to a larger number of potential applicants being counselled out an earlier stage of the enquiry process. The initial enquiry interview conducted over the phone is now more robust, resulting in less people progressing to the next stage.



Application outcomes

Since June 2014 the service has been monitoring the outcomes of all enquiries. Of the 263 enquiries recorded in this way just under half proceeded to the next stage of assessment (129).

It is hoped that through using current carers more throughout the recruitment process, applicants can gain a more realistic insight into what fostering is all about. Promotion where possible does now site that carers would need to have a spare room and the time to commit to a child.

The service recognises that all enquiries need to be dealt with in a timely manner and wherever possible this should be dealt with on the day the person phones fostering. This has not always been achieved and 52 applicants were unable to be contacted by the service and follow up letters were sent to these people. This service is aware that this is not ideal and potential carers could be lost and have adapted the process.

Whenever possible potential applicants are immediately transferred to a Duty worker to do the initial enquiry and there is also a back up duty worker every afternoon to help in this process. A leaflet has also produced to alleviate any fears and concerns which is sent out with follow up letters to potential applicants.

Results

	COUNSELLED OUT	WITHDRAWN	TOTAL
Unrealistic expectations	19	5	24 (29%)
Housing	13	6	19 (23%)
Availability	10	7	17 (21%)
Finance	8	1	9 (11%)
Relationships	3	1	4 (5%)
Other checks	3		3 (4%)
Health	2	1	3 (4%)
DBS Checks	1	0	1 (1%)
Not recorded			2 (2%)

In line with other local authorities and agencies the recruitment process will be changed over the next financial year removing the information evening stage completely.

This will mean that potential applicants will be offered a home visit following a successful initial enquiry. The service is aiming to achieve this within 10 working days and this will start in July 2015





Careers Event, Gateshead International Stadium, 2014.

Television Advert

A 30 second television advert specifically looking to recruit foster carers for teenagers ran for ten days on ITV from 26 November 2014. This included 9 peak time spots and 16 spots off-peak time and was supported by a two week campaign on local channel Made in Tyne and Wear.

The advert had a regional focus with an emotive call to action and was designed to appeal to people who may have teenagers of their own or 'empty nesters'. 16 enquirers cited seeing the advert in November, 20 enquirers cited seeing the advert in December, 4 in January and 4 in February.

Careers Event

The television advert was followed by a careers event in January 2015 which also had a specific focus on attracting carers for teenagers. The event gave the prospective foster carers the opportunity to hear from and talk to current foster carers.

Current carers supported this event sharing their moving accounts of what they have achieved through fostering encouraging others to make the huge step and submit an application. 22 households attended the careers event with 16 enquiries submitted. 6 initial home visits took place as a direct result of the event.

From 31 October 2014 until 5 January 2015 there was also a 36% increase in website page views compared to the previous year.

A google Adwords campaign generated 90 clicks from 1,277 impressions (the amount of times the ad has been viewed on Google search results) during this period.

Skills to Foster Preparation training

Skills to Foster Preparation training for prospective foster carers is planned by the Service in advance and is held at least every 6 to 8 weeks depending on the number of prospective applicants. 27 families attended this training during the year.

This is a priority area for the Service and has already been planned for the next 12 months.

Promotional activity

Promotional activity at the start of the year included adverts in the Council News publication, Bridge banners and an advertising campaign on local bus and metros. There was significant activity for Foster Care Fortnight with the Service having a presence in leisure facilities and supermarkets across Gateshead.

Enquiries over the summer months were low, and with a specific shortage of carers for teenage placements a high level marketing campaign was devised over the Autumn and launched in November 2014.



Filming of TV advert, October 2014.

Video Testimonials

The target of recruiting 30 new carers was met by the end of January 2015 but to ensure a steady flow of applicants being approved into the next financial year is achieved five video testimonials from a range of carers were produced to promote all key areas of the service (payment, training, support and ease of application). The carers that helped with this project, allowing our film crew into their homes and lives to provide real life insight into what being a foster carer is really all about were recognised by the service at the Annual Foster Carers Award Ceremony for their support to the service.

Promotional material commissioned to run through April will specifically drive traffic to the online testimonials and advertise another careers event planned for May 2015. Data collected from the past years enquiries informed the promotional mix chosen for this work. This included bridge banners, advertising on local transport, a new online campaign and a radio campaign which will specifically feature some of the testimonials.

Facebook advertising campaign

For the first time the Service has run a Facebook advertising campaign to promote the testimonial videos. During March the testimonial videos were watched over 3000 times, and the videos and a series of related adverts have made over 300,000 impressions (appeared on 300,000 pages).

People have been interacting with the adverts by posting comments, liking and sharing the content. So far there have been 266 Likes, 36 Comments and 55 shares. There have been 9 related leads to date which is considered a good number for a campaign of this type.

Retention

Retention of existing foster carers is also a high priority for the Fostering Service and foster carers are provided with extensive support and training.

Each fostering household is reviewed on an annual basis, chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). This process uses feedback from the foster carers, children in placement and children within the fostering family, as well as the carers' supervising social worker and social workers for children who are and who have been placed with the foster carers. This feedback is valued by the service and is used to develop and improve the service

Training

The service continues to develop the training offered to all approved foster carers. These include specialist subjects such as Attachment, Child Protection Awareness, Equality and Diversity, Emergency First Aid, Level 1 Food Hygiene, Life Story Work, Promoting Positive Behaviour, Recording Skills and Safer Caring Training.

Full time foster carers are expected to complete these courses within the first 12 months of their approval, and Home from Home and respite carers are given 18 months to complete these. Foster carers are also encouraged to attend further training through their fostering career.

These courses, as well as any refresher training they require are identified through discussions with their supervising social worker and forms their professional development plan. This is also linked to the payment for skills criteria and levels.

Following feedback from approved foster carers the service will begin to deliver four of the mandatory training courses for people in the assessment process. This is due to be implemented in the summer of 2015 and will be monitored and reviewed to ensure it is being utilised and helps prepare new foster carers for the role.

All foster carers under the Fostering regulations have to complete their Training, Support and Development (TSD) Standards for Foster Carers within 12 months of approval. This year 26 foster carers achieved this. Preparation training and regular workshops are provided for foster carers to help them with the information they need to be able to complete their portfolio, along with giving them practical hints and tips on gathering evidence and information.

The service also requires all foster carers on Payment for Skills level 2 or above to complete their Level 3 Diploma for the Children and Young People's Workforce. 36 foster carers completed this during 2014 -15 All of the carers who completed their TSD or Diploma were presented with certificates for their achievements at the Foster Carer Awards Ceremony.

Each foster carer now has a tailored Personal Development Plan which is reviewed regularly by their supervising social worker and their PDP is linked to the needs of the child or children in placement and the payment for skills level they are on. The training offered and taken up by Gateshead's carers is monitored and evaluated to ensure we are providing our carers with the skills and knowledge they need in order to support young people and help them achieve the best possible outcomes.

Christmas Party and Summer Family Fun Day

A Family Fun Day took place in July at Cardinal Hume School. Children were able to take part in a range of activities including facepainting, bouncy castles and football shoot outs, and there was the opportunity to see a range of insects and small reptiles with the 'Bug Man'. Feedback from the carers and young people that attended was very positive and they would like this to be an annual event.

Children enjoyed a visit from Santa at the annual Christmas Party, and carers met for a Christmas coffee morning, complete with mince pies and Christmas raffle.

Support Groups

Regular support groups for foster carers have continued to take place covering a wide range of relevant topics including Early Years, Advocacy, Sexual Exploitation, Long Term Training and Delegated Authority, with speakers regularly invited to attend. They have proven to be very successful with positive feedback from both foster carers and invited speakers.

A consultation with foster carers took place in the Autumn of 2014 to help develop the support groups and to find out what carers would like from future support groups. This information has been used by the service to shape the format and frequency of the groups.

Monthly Bulletin

A monthly bulletin to carers about the Service and its recruitment activity has been established. Carers have been engaging with the bulletin and offering to be involved in some of the recruitment initiatives.



Carer Dawn Duffy who features in a video testimonial

Foster Carer Awards Ceremony

The Fostering Service celebrated its 4th annual Foster Carer Awards on 24 March 2015 which recognises the dedication and hard work of all of the council's foster carers and thanks them for the invaluable work they do. This year, a record number of carers achieved their Level 3 Diploma for the Children and Young People's Workforce and 26 carers were awarded with their Training support and development standards certificates.

Foster carer Pauline Mason with granddaughter receiving Twenty Five Year Service Award from Chief Executive Jane Robinson. Gateshead Council has 12 carers who have been approved for over 20 years, and 1 set of carers who have been approved for 38 years.

Awards were also given for Support to the Service, Outstanding Support to Children and Extra Mile Awards based on nominations from Children's social workers, education and Health, who felt certain carers had done particularly outstanding work on behalf of the service or with the children in their care.

The ceremony was held at the Lancastrian Suite, Federation Brewery and was compared by local actress and Emmerdale star, Chelsea Halfpenny. Over 350 guests attended the event including the Mayor, Councillors, foster carers, their family members, Looked After Young People, and officers

New foster carers Andrea & Carl Bone receiving their Welcome to the Service Award from Gateshead Council's Chief Executive Jane Robinson. 41 new sets of carers were approved this year.





Foster Carers Jacqueline Elliott and Harvey McConnell receiving their Outstanding Support to Children Award from Councillor Angela Douglas. Following two placement breakdowns, Jacqueline and Harvey now care for a young sibling group, with one boy having complex needs. The boys social worker nominated the couple for the significant progress the child has made in this placement, thanks to the stability, routine and nurture provided.



Some of the carers receiving their Level 3 Diploma for the Children and Young People's Workforce and Training support and development standards certificates.

Young singer Courtney Choppin performing with guitarist Max.



Foster carers Helen and Michael Nelson receiving their Extra Mile Award from Councillor Angela Douglas. Helen and Michael Nelson are new carers. Helen doesn't drive but has worked really hard to ensure that the children attend their clubs and out of school activities, really putting herself out using public transport. Helen recognised the children's faith is important to them. Although not practising a particular faith herself, Helen has also ensured that the children are able to continue with their faith by identifying and taking them along to a suitable local church and Sunday school.



Foster carer Val Prince receiving her Support to the Service Award from Councillor Angela Douglas. Val was one of five sets of carers who provided a video testimonial about her experience of fostering. Val allowed the film crew into her home to share her best memories of fostering to encourage other prospective carers to come forward.



Fostering Panel

In broad terms the role of the Fostering Panel provides an independent perspective on the business of the Fostering Service, informed by a range of expertise to monitor and quality assure social work practice in the best interests of children and young people in foster care. It provides recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker that accurately reflects the facts of the cases presented.

There is a need for Fostering Services to maintain a Central List of panel members consisting of a multidisciplinary membership of experienced professionals. No business can be conducted by panel unless at least the following people are present:

The Chair or one of the Vice-Chairs

One member who is a social worker (who may or may not be employed by the Fostering Service) with at least 3 years relevant post-qualifying experience

Three other members from the Central List

At least one member of the panel must be independent (this can be the Chair or Vice-Chair) - Regulation 24 (1)

The UK National Standards for Foster Care 2011 (14.8) recommends that:

"...the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for"

Gateshead's fostering service continues to operate 2 panels per month, with membership being made up from the central list. Each panel has a consistent membership and is chaired by the same panel chair to ensure consistency and continuity when dealing with all panel business.

All panel members have an annual panel review, where they are consulted about their views, discuss how they are developing their role on panel, identify any areas of development and make suggestions on how panel can be improved. The review is carried out by Sue Holton - panel chair and Jill Little - agency advisor.

All new Panel members are given induction training, which is held over a half day and covers Panel's statutory function and business as well as the expectations of Panel members.

This ensures people are fully aware of the legislation relating to panel, the function and running of panel and the expectations on panel members. People who have attended this training have given positive feedback and feel that it has helped them in their role as a panel member

Training is also provided to all Panel members on a bi-annual basis. This year, the training has primarily focused on the implementation of the new Regulations, the Form F assessment process and analysis, Foster Carer Review paperwork and the long term matching process.

Following the retirement of Frances Powell in April 2015, new Service Director Deborah Patterson will be appointed as Agency Decision Maker.

The panel met twenty four times during the year to meet the increasing needs of the service.

ACTIVITY	2014-2015
Form F assessments	41
Connected person	9
De-registrations of foster carers	31
De-registrations of connected persons	12
Change to approval category	8
Foster carer reviews	52
Identification of children needing long term foster care	10
Matching children and carers	25

Number of placements

The Service has acquired 41 new sets of non-connected person foster carers who can potentially offer up to 74 full time placements, if siblings can share a room. Panel have been flexible with their approval categories in relation to the age range and have tried to approve people up to the age of 18 if they are in agreement with this. They have recommended preferences in relation to the age range rather than being specific, which ensures carers do not need to come back to panel if they take a slightly older or younger child than their preference.

In addition, 9 new sets of connected person foster carers were approved throughout the year, for a total of 14 children.

De-registrations

The 'Local Authority Fostering Services in England performance benchmark report 2013/14' shows that nationally 12% of foster carers left their service. In Gateshead 43 sets of foster carers were de-registered at panel, equating to 22%, which is higher than any other year. The Service has had a high proportion of older foster carers for some time so the high retirement rate has been expected.

As some of these older carers have offered no, or very limited placements over the past few years the actual amount of placements the Service can offer has not decreased significantly. This number has been offset by the high number of placements than new carers can offer.

REASON	NUMBER
Resignation	3
Retirement	4
Change of personal circumstances e.g. return to work, new partner	0
Change in family circumstances e.g birth of child, adopted child	9
Allegations/concerns	7
Transferred to Supported Lodgings/Shared lives/staying put	2
Residence Order or Special Guardianship Order for carer	7
Connected person - rehabilitation home	7
Impact on Family/Unable to manage fostering task	4

The de-registration of foster carers will continue to fluctuate and on average the service will de-register between 5 and 15% of it's carers every year. This is similar to the national average and is monitored closely by the team manager. It has been evident this year that 3 newly approved foster carers were de registered within 12 - 18 months of approval.

The service has looked at this and identified the following

- Panel had identified some concerns but not enough to make a negative recommendation.
- Assessments were undertaken by inexperienced agency Form F assessors

The service has implemented a more robust supervision policy for agency Form F assessors and panel have looked at previous minutes to see if there can be any learning from these de registrations.

Panel Feedback Forms

The agency has implemented feedback forms for everyone attending panel. This includes all social workers, prospective foster carers and approved foster carers.

This feedback is being monitored by the Fostering Team Manager and used to improve panel. The feedback forms have largely identified that people attending panel have a positive experience, they feel that they are made to feel welcome and the questions they are asked are relevant.



Carer Val Prince with grandchildren who feature in a video testimonial

Service Development

In addition to working to implement any proposed new governmental reforms to fostering practice, the key areas for development within the Fostering service are:

- To review the Payment for Skills scheme and ensure that it is working for both the Fostering Service and foster carers. This will be undertaken in the autumn of 2015.
- To continue to develop the Staying Put scheme which allows and supports young people aged 18 and over to remain in their fostering placements.
- To work towards achieving targets for recruiting carers, with the aim being a minimum of 30 fostering households each financial year.
- To ensure that the recruitment strategy is robust and that there is evidence that we are providing a choice of appropriate placements for all children.
- To develop additional support and training for carers considering taking complex teenagers.
- To ensure that placement stability is improved and achieved.
- Continued reduction of Independent Fostering Placements.
- To continue to monitor the Fostering Service and evaluate all activities to ensure that the best performance and outcomes possible are achieved.

