

Committee: **Corporate Parenting Panel**
Date: **23 July 2010**
Title of report: **Update on Progress of the Family Plus Service**
By: **Director of Children's Services**
Purpose of report: **To inform the panel of progress of this service that is aimed at supporting children to be cared for by their extended family and friends network as an alternative to becoming looked after.**

Recommendation: The Panel is asked to note these service developments and their impact on supporting children on the edge of care.

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 There are no increased costs arising from this report.

2. Supporting Information

2.1 The Progress Report of the Family Plus Service is attached as **Appendix 1**.

3. Recommendation

3.1 The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the contents of the report.

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Local Members: All

Background Documents: None

Update on Progress of the Family Plus Service

1. Financial Appraisal

1.1 Within the revised Children Act Guidance and Public Law Outline (PLO) guidance about the new approach to care proceedings that came into place on 1 April 2008, there was increased emphasis on children being cared for within the family network. This had implications on resources around assessment and support for family carers.

1.2 In response to these requirements, additional resources were invested in forming a new Family Plus Team and expansion of the Family Group Conference (FGC) Service. These two teams combined to form the Family Plus Service which is managed by one Practice Manager.

1.3 The FGC Service increased in size in September 2008. The Family Plus Team commenced work in April 2009, expanding to full capacity by December 2009. In the budget for 2010/11, £272,800 will be allocated to Family Group Conferences and £287,700 to Family Plus.

1.4 A further £1,232,000 has been allocated for the payment of Residence and Special Guardianship allowances.

2. Supporting Information

2.1 East Sussex was well placed for the introduction of the new guidance through the Extended Family and Kinship Support strand of the Family Support Strategy, and the policy agreed by the Lead Member for Children and Families in June 2006. This policy ensured that allowances paid to family and friends, who care for children under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, or under a Residence Order/Special Guardianship Order, as an alternative to children being looked after by the County Council, were brought in line with the fostering allowances paid to family and friends who are foster carers, subject to a means test and to deductions equivalent to the value of state benefit entitlements that are payable once a Residence Order/Special Guardianship Order is in place. The fostering allowances paid to family and friends foster carers are based on the basic maintenance allowance without the professional fee paid to general foster carers. Operational Instructions to ensure financial support to such family carers were issued in January 2009.

2.2 The Family Plus Team now undertakes the assessment of family & friends carers, identified through the permanence assessment and care planning process as potential alternative family carers who are willing to provide permanent care for a child and acquire parental responsibility through the court as an alternative to the child being looked after. This includes:

- Family carers caring by agreement with parents supported under Section 17 of the Children Act and acquiring parental responsibility through Special Guardianship Order/Residence Order to avoid the necessity for the child to be a Looked After Child and care proceedings issued.
- Family carers caring for looked after children subject to Care Proceedings where the Care Plan is for the carers to acquire parental responsibility via a Residence Order or Special Guardianship Order so as to remain with the family carer at the end of the proceedings and potential family carers identified during the process of care proceedings, usually where the child is currently with non related foster carers. In the latter case once assessed the Court can either agree to the children moving to those carers within the proceedings or at the end of the proceedings.

2.3 The Family Plus team provide a continuum of support to the carers and the newly formed family unit. It is aimed to build on the expertise and best practice of current permanence and placement support services and building knowledge and practice around kinship care by providing responsive support to the carers, child and whole family alongside area based social work support for the child, when needed, on a continuum of support.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Plus social worker for carer • placement support • child's social worker from area team | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Plus social worker for carer and new family unit • annual review including financial review |
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2.4 The Contract with Action for Children (formerly NCH), that previously ensured support of children and extended families where a Residence Order or Special Guardianship Order had been granted, and which also assessed and supported private fostering arrangements, ceased in March 2009. Those functions and the existing caseload of private fostering assessment and support of carers was taken on by the Family Plus team from 1 April 2009. The Family Plus team started undertaking assessments of new carers in September 2009 and became fully staffed in December 2009.

2.5 New "Operational Instruction for the Assessment Support and Regulation of Family & Friends Carers and Kinship Foster Carers" were published in September 2009. Since then the assessment and support of family carers has become increasingly embedded in to practice with children at risk of family breakdown and the planning for Looked After Children (LAC)

2.6 Where the children being cared for by family carers are subject of Interim Care Orders and therefore Looked After Children the requirement under Fostering Regulations is that the carers are approved as Foster Carers for the care of that child. These assessments are now undertaken by the Family Plus team and presented for Interim Approval to the Fostering Panel, and the team provide the required support and supervision of the placement.

2.7 Thus family carers, whatever the legal status of the child at the time, have a continuum of assessment and support from the Family Plus team who are becoming increasingly experienced in this particular form of care.

2.8 The number of carers the team is supporting increased steadily in 2009/10 from 58 carers in Quarter 1, to 94 sets of carers in Quarter 4, caring for 116 children on either Residence Orders or Special Guardianship Orders. In the half year from September 09 – March 10 the team took referrals for the assessment of 42 new sets of carers. The team also assessed 37 new notifications of private fostering arrangements and on average were regulating and supporting 23 such arrangements at any one time. The capacity of the team to respond to this increasing demand will need to be kept under review.

2.9 Alongside this, the Family Group Conference (FGC) service has continued to develop so that a FGC can now be offered whenever a child or young person is considered to be 'on the edge of care'; either a teenager at risk of family breakdown or where extended family members are being explored for an alternative permanent carer under the new Guidance. The Family Plus practice manager is also responsible for the management of the FGC service such that the work of the FGC service and the Family Plus team combine to ensure family options are explored then assessed and supported.

2.10 The FGC Service has had the capacity thus far to respond to the increasing numbers of such children. In 2009/10 the FGC service took referrals in relation to 246 families. Outcomes were very positive; for referrals of children aged 0-11 95% of families asked to identify alternative carers were able to do so and within the referrals for children aged 12 plus there was 81% success over the year at preventing family breakdown or returning children to the family where an FGC took place.

3. Conclusion and Reason for Recommendation

3.1 The Family Plus Service has been an exciting development which enables children, who would otherwise have been looked after, to be cared for within their extended family. The service has ensured that these children are safeguarded effectively, that their carers receive support and advice in meeting their needs and that the need for children to be looked after by the County Council is reduced.

3.2 The first draft Statutory Guidance on Family & Friends Care was recently published for consultation, as a result of the development of the Family Plus Service the Council will be well positioned to meet the requirements of that Guidance once it is implemented.