

# Annual Progress Report of East Sussex Fostering Service 1 April 2015 – 31 March 2016

## 1. Safeguarding

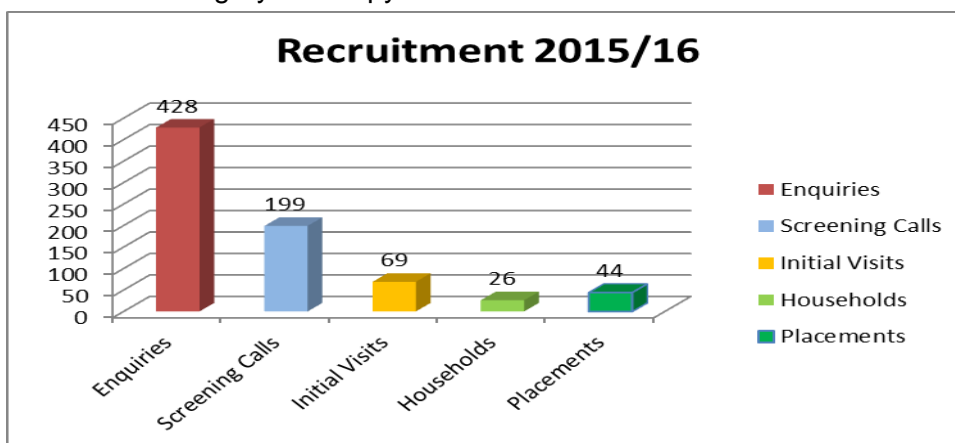
1.1 This outcome is fundamental to the delivery of fostering services across East Sussex and is embedded in each of the core functions: recruitment and retention; assessment, supervision and review; foster carer training; the matching and placing of children and young people with foster carers. These areas are addressed in more detail below.

## 2. Recruitment and Retention of Carers

2.1 2015 – 2016 proved to be a challenging year for fostering recruitment. The experiences of our immediate neighbours and Fostering Services nationally have also reflected that the recruitment of foster carers has been particularly challenging. While there appears to be no consistent rationale for this, a contributing factor is thought to be public awareness of historical allegations, highlighted in high profile prosecutions of abuse. In addition, the success of ESCC recruitment of foster carers over the last 2 or 3 years has, to some extent, exhausted the existing recruitment pool. This is evidenced in the poor quantity and quality of agency carers available in the East Sussex region. The age range of approval has also narrowed over the past year, with households being approved for sibling groups within a restrictive age range. Once foster carers have gained some experience, supervising social workers work with foster carers to extend their age range as they become more confident and skilled in managing the complex needs of many of our looked after children (LAC). The number of foster carers transferring from agencies still remains healthy, although many have been persuaded to remain with their own agencies by being offered huge financial incentives.

2.2 As with last year, the recruitment and retention team have continued to achieve their timescale targets for assessments of 6 – 8 months (dependent on the complexity of the assessment). In order to achieve the expedient and efficient transfer of carers from other agencies the recruitment and assessment team has implemented a timely assessment tool, optimising the existing statutory information from foster carers' previous agency. This has allowed ESCC to approve transferring carers within 3 months of their initial enquiry.

2.3 From 1 April 2015 – 31 March 2016, 428 new enquiries were received which led to 199 screening calls and 69 initial visits to prospective foster carers. The recruitment strategy focused for the first part of the year on prioritising the recruitment of carers for older children. This resulted in very few enquiries. The strategy was then reviewed to include all age ranges. This resulted in an increase of enquiries as evidenced in the upturn of approvals towards the end of the year. The recruitment for Children with Disabilities (CWD) remains marketed under the same fostering banner with imagery and copy relevant to CWD.



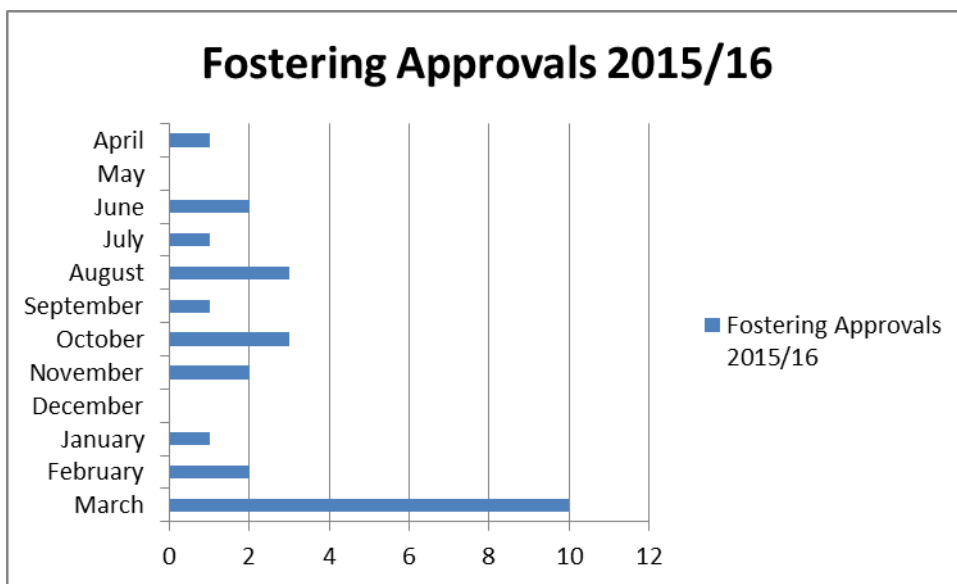
2.4 The Children in Care Council (CICC) now play a full role in contributing to the assessment, holding informal interviews with all applicants going through ESCC's foster carer approval process. 6 "Skills to Foster" pre-assessment preparation courses were held during 15-16 and 27 households have attended these courses.

2.5 26 households that offer 44 placements were approved in 2015-16. 6 of these households were transfers from independent fostering providers with 4 East Sussex looked after children already placed with these families. 2 LAC from other local authorities were also placed with these foster carers. This has brought significant income generation into the service. After the deduction of the East Sussex foster carer allowances paid to these foster carers, the transfer of these foster carers equates to a saving to ESCC of £288,305 per year in agency fees.

2.6 For 2015/16 the Fostering Service saw the loss of 24 carers which represented 8% of its total carer resource. Although this is an increase on last year's retention of just below 3%, it continues to be well below the national average of 12% last recorded. A breakdown of reasons for carers leaving ESCC include: foster carers applying for special guardianship orders and adoption orders and changes in foster carers' personal circumstances. Nearly one third of losses were due to carers deciding to retire from fostering. The Fostering Service has anticipated that there will be an increasing number of foster carers retiring given that the percentage of our foster carers over 50 years of age is high, and this is part of a wider demographic trend. The Department of Education's Local Authority Fostering Service Benchmark Report (2014) cites:

"According to the Fostering Network research, foster carers stay in their role for an average of seven and a half years. Many leave due to changes in personal circumstances or at a natural point for their time as foster carers to cease. This is often retirement age as foster carers on average are aged 50-55 years".

2.7 The diagram below illustrates the total number of carers recruited each month.



2.8 There were 14 fostering assessments still in progress at 31 March 2016. The recruitment and retention team is also following up enquiries from a further 3 fostering households currently approved by independent fostering agencies who are expressing an interest in transferring to ESCC.

2.9 The service continues to employ the marketing strategy of "continual presence". This consists of wide-ranging extensive advertising throughout the year using a range of different mediums. As the Fostering Service marketing strategy for 2015-16 has been the most high profile to date, the service is confident via its data that when residents of East Sussex want to consider fostering, it is ESCC they approach first.

Below are some examples of the mediums used to promote fostering recruitment this year:

- Bus shelters

- Local buses
- Sovereign FM Radio, Arrow FM Radio and Heart FM
- Local papers
- Lamp post banners
- 'Display vans' in both Hastings and Eastbourne
- 'Your County' magazine
- Twitter
- Facebook
- ESCC payslips

2.10 One of the new marketing initiatives in 2015/16 was the use of television advertising to produce a series of advertisements demographically targeted to recruit carers in the west and north east of the county. Although the take up was lower than predicted, the advertisement was developed so as to allow the service to retain the copyrights. The filming was re-edited to provide very effective social media clips that went across a range of popular social media sites including You-Tube and Facebook.

### Recruitment Events

- Information evenings have been held monthly - 10 in Eastbourne, 1 in Hastings. The Operations Manager attended a special event with Home For Good, a charitable organisation helping to deal with the refugee crisis. Over 60 people attended and this generated 5 enquiries, one of which is currently progressing through to assessment.

### Retention Events

- In October 2015, the Fostering Service in conjunction with East Sussex Foster Carer Association (ESFCA), held a 'Children Who Foster' residential trip at PGL, Windmill Hill in celebration of Sons & Daughters week. In August 2015, a picnic was held at Knockhatch for all carers of ESCC children and staff. This continues to prove to be a successful way of raising our profile with agency carers.
- In June 2015, an evening event was held at Bannatynes Spa Hotel, Hastings, to say 'Thank You' to our carers. This was attended by 130 carers and staff.
- The Fostering Service continues to send newsletters to foster carers providing up to date information on the service and looked after children and to promote the service's support groups and training events.

### Advertising and Media Coverage



- This year the Fostering Service originally focussed their recruitment strategy on "Could you foster a teenager". It became apparent in the first part of the year that the take up for this age group was particularly challenging. The strategy was reviewed to refocus our target group to foster carers for all ages. The campaign of "Don't keep them waiting" proved to be more successful.

For the first time the Fostering Service was able to secure a marketing partnership with Amey, an ESCC commissioned company, with their countywide van fleet now sporting promotional fostering signage.



### 3. Foster Care Training

3.1 From 1st September 2015 to the 31st March 2016, 589 training places have been taken up by foster carers (last year's equivalent was 554), predicting a slight increase for the overall academic year. Evaluation of the courses by participants shows 89 % to be excellent.

3.2 New courses introduced this year have included:

- Missing and Child Sexual Exploitation.
- Prevent Awareness.
- Insiders Course, promoting foster carers' resilience.
- Fostering Changes, adolescence, addressing behaviour management strategies.
- Understanding and Supporting Lesbian and Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Unsure Children and Young People.
- Legal High Drug Awareness, prior to the law change.
- Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome.
- Understanding Autism.
- Promoting Positive Behaviours 5 day course, supporting foster carers by developing a Behaviour Support Plan.
- Adolescent Support Discussion Groups, addressing many aspects regarding looking after teenagers.
- Internet Security / Parental Controls and Filters Course.
- Digital Photo Albums.

3.3 Continual Professional Development Opportunities are also available: 15 foster carers are undertaking a variety of qualifications. These include the level 3 Diploma, Children and Young People's Workforce qualification, and the Level 3 Training, Assessment and Quality Assuring qualification in assessing occupational competence.

3.4 In recognition of the varied expertise, knowledge and skill base of some of our foster carers, it is planned to bring courses in-house. This will do two things, it will enable us to use the existing expertise, knowledge and skills of East Sussex Carers in a training role, and secondly it will be more cost effective to upskill those that need further training. To ensure the quality of training, there is an agreed framework of requirements and support identified:

- To have a minimum recognised occupational based qualification (Qualification and Credit Framework Level 3 Diploma Children and Young People Workforce).
- To attend a Train the Trainers course.
- To plan course content and delivery in conjunction with the foster carer training and development consultant.
- Quality assurance activities to be undertaken.
- To gain an education and training qualification at either level 3 or 4.

3.5 Planned courses for 2016/17 include developing:

- Internet Safety Courses, addressing primary and secondary aged children, addressing the risks and management strategies.
- Added concerns regarding the internet, CSE and Radicalisation, incorporating the Dark Web.
- Fostering Changes, under 12's course.
- Caring for asylum seeking, refugee and unaccompanied children.
- Supporting education and success, a practical approach for primary and secondary aged children.
- Promoting children and young people's health and healthy living.
- Practical skills to manage challenging behaviours.
- Discussion groups, identified subject area, supporting foster carers understanding.

3.6 As of July 2016, foster carers will be able to access the East Sussex Learning Portal, to be able to apply to the wide ranging training provided by Local Safeguarding Children's Board and Children's Services courses and to manage their own continuous professional development.

3.7 Men who Foster

The introduction of the 'Men who Foster' group in 2014 continues to be successful, now attracting a consistent membership. The subjects addressed in 2015/16 included:

- Addressing safe care issues.
- What makes a positive male role model?
- The difference between being a parent and a foster carer.
- How does fostering impact on your relationships?

#### **4. Foster carer support and supervision**

4.1 The Fostering Service currently has 292 fostering households that provide a range of placements for children and young people including parent and baby placements. Supervision and contact plans are assessed on the complexity of the children placed, taking into account the need of the foster carers and of their family. The pressures and demands over the last year on foster carers and supervising social workers (SSW) have increased, but the quality of the support provided has remained at a high standard.

4.2 Support groups are available to provide foster carers with opportunities to meet with other carers, to increase support networks and to give the opportunity for shared learning. There are four localised groups in Uckfield, Rotherfield, Eastbourne and Newhaven. There are also four themed support groups: black and minority ethnic children and young people's support group; a parent and child foster carers' support group; a support group for carers of adolescents and a 'men who foster' support group. A "Buddy" system is also available when this is required.

4.3 Further support is provided for foster carers through the Fostering Advice line - an out of hours advice line service available to all foster carers and supported lodgings providers for 365 days per year. This service is staffed by a team of 7 workers from the Fostering Service, working on a rota basis, to provide support and advice to all foster carers.

4.4 There continues to be close working relationships with LAC teams, The Child and Adolescent Mental Health service, The Virtual School and Placement Support services(PSS); all of which are invaluable to supporting foster carers in sustaining placements and endeavouring to meet the children/young people's needs.

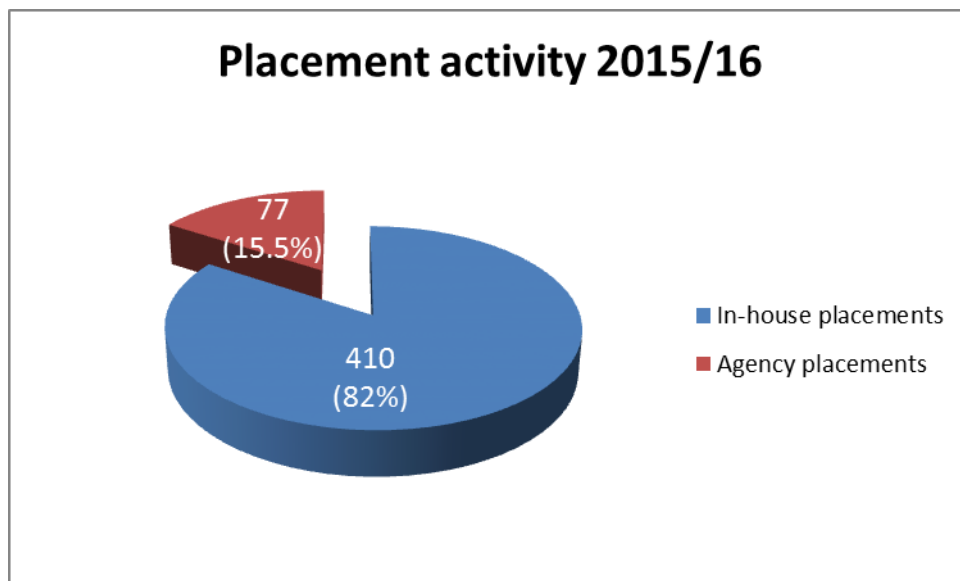
## 5. Health

5.1 Meeting the health needs of LAC remains a priority for the Fostering Service. In 2015/16 foster carers continued to prioritise the health needs of their children, with SSWs monitoring and supporting foster carers to ensure timely health assessments are in place, via notifications and liaison with Kent Community Health Care Trust, the designated nurse for LAC and the LAC nurses.

## 6. Placement Activity

6.1 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016 there were 498 children in foster care. 410 of these children were placed with in-house placements. This includes in-house "parent and child" placements, children subject to Special Guardianship Orders placed with foster carers and those children remaining in their "staying put" fostering placements through to independence. There were 88 fostered children placed with agency carers.

6.2 The number of East Sussex LAC placed in agency placements has decreased from 94 children (19%) in 2014/15 to 77 (15.5%) at the end of March 2016. Given the challenging matching considerations and complex needs of many of the young people for this reporting period, the Fostering Service would consider this a significant achievement.



6.3 18 young people (over 18 years of age) remain with their foster carers under the 'Staying Put' arrangements. There are also 32 children who are currently subject to Special Guardianship Orders placed with East Sussex foster carers. Fostering households also provide adoptive parents for 9 children, with one further foster carer currently undergoing an assessment to adopt a child in placement. Clearly this level of stability is very positive for individual children but it does impact on the number of placements.

6.4 Of the 459 referrals received between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016, 434 resulted in placements being made or matched. Of the 459 referrals, 153 were ultimately not required and 27 remain awaiting placement (a combination of respite and short-term placements). The figures show an efficient duty service which has converted 94% of referral to placements made/matched

which is on a par with last year's performance. In order to meet the challenge of our children with more complex and challenging needs, Fostering Duty managers have worked closely with their operational colleagues to be given advanced notice of pending placement requests.

6.5 The matching process remains vital. The ongoing challenge is that if we match children with complex needs with newly approved foster carers, an extensive support package needs to be put in place, so that foster carers are adequately supported to deal with some of our most challenging LAC.

## **7. Placement Support**

7.1 The Placement Support Service (PSS) is currently working with 110 children, young people and their foster carers by providing targeted packages of support both short and long term. In 2015-2016, 24 new referrals were picked up by the service including life story work. 81 support packages were reviewed with 15 pieces of work ending as 'aim achieved'. PSS also responded to 65 emergency or crisis requests from carers that resulted in 141 days of support being provided.

7.2 PSS remains a vital and valued resource that provides flexible, robust and creative support to sustain the most challenging foster care placements and in preventing a move to costly agency alternatives. The following examples of feedback from carers demonstrate how much they benefit from this support:

- *'Placement Support Service is incredibly helpful and the young person comes home happy from their activities'*
- *'PSS and activities are a very valuable support for the whole family especially in the holidays.'*
- *'PSS gives us a break from our daily challenges.'*
- *'Helps the young person increase in self-confidence and raises self-esteem.'*
- *'This has helped us get through some difficult times.'*

7.3 The PSS continues its close partnership with the Looked After Children's Mental Health Service (LACAMHS) by attending their monthly multiagency meeting.

7.4 During the reporting period the Virtual School commissioned PSS staff to support 11 children with complex needs who were temporarily without education for a total of 181 days. PSS continues to maintain the positive links developed with the Virtual School who are supportive of the activities PSS provide.

7.5 The PSS provides respite holiday and weekend group activities to some LAC aged 5 to 17 during school holidays. The activities provide enriching, fun and educative experiences for children who cannot access community resources. They aim to build confidence, raise self-esteem and to reduce the stigma that some young people feel by being in care. It is a cost effective way of providing support at the most stressful periods for foster carers.

7.6 The PSS has:

- Provided 42 group activities as well as an additional 8 group Saturday activities. 10 to 15 young people attend each activity.
- Offered 451 places to children and young people. 98% of children rate the activities as good to excellent.
- Formed a positive relationship with Rhythmix, a voluntary organisation whose focus with children is music. These activities are provided free and are particularly successful for young people who find it difficult to engage in activities.
- Continued to work with St Bedes who have provided free zoo days as well as free access to their sports facilities that have also been popular.
- Negotiated free visits to the local Fire Station and to Raystede animal sanctuary. Children also regularly swim for free at Crowhurst Country Park.

## **8. User Participation**

8.1 The Younger User group met six times during the year and following a review decided that a separate group was no longer needed. They felt that a better way of involving more junior aged children should be via SUSS IT (speak up sessions) that take place during the school holidays. This has worked well as an alternative and 29 issues for this younger group of LAC have been satisfactorily resolved. A recurring theme is a need to improving contact arrangements for children.

8.2 In April 2015 the Junior Action Day was held and 36 primary school aged children attended, the theme being Protective Behaviours.

8.3 The latest Children In Care Council (CICC) commenced on 28th September 2013 and goes from strength to strength. The CICC has decided to continue as an ongoing group in future and to replace members as necessary, rather than start afresh every three years. They have met as a group twelve times. Senior managers from the LAC service, other social work children's teams, and NYAS have also attended.

8.4 The 2015 CICC Newsletter was produced and widely distributed to children in care and professionals, as were the Children's Handbook, Pledge and CICC top tip playing cards.

8.5 During 2015-2016 the CICC/CICC coordinator attended:

- 41 holiday activities to promote Speak up Sessions (SUSS IT). 53 issues raised by looked after children were resolved as a result.
- 23 local and national meetings, events and consultations that included: meeting with the Corporate Parenting Panel, the Children's Minister, the Children's Commissioner, the local judiciary, testing the MOMO app, and meeting with a wider Pan Sussex group.
- Recruitment panels and events that included appointing the new Children's Commissioner, foster carer recruitment via Sky, and three ESCC staff recruitment panels.

CICC has attended the following personal development and training events:



- 3 members completed Level 1 Leadership training.
- 8 Completed British Youth Council Democracy Champion training.
- 7 have completed I Food Hygiene training.
- 7 attended National Takeover Day.
- 14 children are currently working on their Bronze Arts Award.
- 1 completed Basic First Aid Training.
- 2 completed SPARK representative training, a voluntary organisation set up to train volunteers who wish to do youth work.
- CICC members continue to volunteer both in the community and for ESCC.

## **9. Working in Partnership**

### **ESFCA**

9.1 The Operations Manager of the Fostering Service continues to attend the monthly meetings of the East Sussex Foster Care Association (ESFCA) management group to report on developments in the Fostering Service and Children's Services. This relationship is particularly significant at the moment as the association has, in the last 6 months, gone through a change of chair and trustees. The association is taking forward a new agenda for its members which includes them supporting the fostering services in its operational responsibilities, including informal support, advice and "buddying" of new carers.

9.2 The Operations Managers for Looked After Children and the Fostering Service with the Chair of the ESFCA continue to host monthly 'surgeries' for foster carers who can bring issues and problems directly to key managers.

### **Virtual School**

9.3 Partnership work with The Virtual School continues to be very significant in the support and promotion of children's educational needs, both for their prospective and existing placements. Placement stability has a direct correlation with a young person's school placement and if the school can remain consistent when a child becomes LAC, the likelihood of placement breakdown is significantly reduced.

## **10. The Supported Lodgings Team**

10.1 Supported lodging providers continue to offer valuable placements for LAC, care leavers and homeless young people in the East Sussex area. Over the last year we have seen an increase in the high level of care needed for very complex young people coming into placement. Our providers have demonstrated their skills, flexibility and willingness to rise to the challenge of accommodating these older looked after children.

10.2 There are currently 32 supportive provider households providing a total of 49 placements across the county. Since April 2015, 16 supported lodgings assessments have been undertaken with 9 being approved and a further 6 assessments awaiting approval.

10.3 An objective over this past year has been to encourage supported lodging providers to consider becoming approved foster carers, therefore enhancing their potential to provide placements for younger LAC. This has been successful with 4 carers now holding dual registration as foster carers and supportive lodgings providers which enables them to provide care placements for our younger and more complex and challenging Looked After Children before they become 16 years old.

10.4 During the last year, supported lodging carers have provided a number of 'step down' placements for children from in-house residential placements as well as from both agency and in-

house foster placements. Significantly, supported lodgings carers have provided 7 placements for LAC moving from expensive external residential provision at a saving of £544,195.

10.5 The Supported Lodgings Team recognise the increased pressure on the availability of supported lodgings beds. As a result the team is pushing forward with a recruitment campaign. The team regularly advertises in local newspapers and once a year in Your County magazine. This has proved to be very successful in generating new applicants and interest in the Service.

## 11. Summary

11.1 2015/16 has brought a number of challenges to the Fostering Service: financial constraints and the ever reducing pool of new foster carers to recruit from. Despite these challenges, the outcomes for the Fostering Service have remained strong. However, this has only been achieved by using extensive resources (more staff and management time, energy and commitment) to match our children and young people who demonstrate more risk taking behaviours and complex needs. As with last year's success, this year has been built on a strong foundation of effective support to our foster carers. Agency foster carers who have transferred to ESCC have come to us because of our reputation of supporting our foster carers well. Recruitment of new carers has been challenging not only for ESCC but also for our neighbouring partners (and nationally). All our providers, including our preferred independent foster agencies continue to struggle to recruit any new foster carers. Therefore, our focus continues to be on attracting existing approved foster carers to our authority and on developing and retaining our existing foster carers.

11.2 Our referral profiles of children requiring placements have changed considerably over the last year, with carers being asked to take on more young people with challenging and complex needs. Therefore, it is inevitable that placement breakdowns are more likely to occur. Even so, our placement stability has only seen a small increase for children who experience 3 placements or more to just above 10%. This is comparable with the national average.

11.3 The Supported Lodgings Service has built on its success from last year, making bespoke and appropriate placements for young people whilst also making significant savings. The care packages provided by this service have been excellent, giving young people the opportunity to develop independence skills with the support and supervision of care providers. The complexity of placements being taken on by the Supported Lodgings Service has necessitated access to appropriate training and support for carers, the take up of which has increased considerably during this reporting period.

11.4 We have targeted recruitment and designed our income generation programme around the recruitment of all potential local carers. These carers would then be available, not only for children in East Sussex, but could also be 'sold' to our neighbouring authorities for their use. This would give neighbouring authorities the opportunity of having good quality placements supported by East Sussex Fostering Service at a cost that is less than that of an independent fostering agency.

The Key Management Priorities for 2016-2017 include:

- To continue active recruitment and provision of high quality training and support for our carers so that stability for children is prioritised.
- To continue with an extensive and continuous recruitment strategy throughout the year to attract potential foster carers to come to East Sussex as the preferred fostering agency in this area. This will include targeted recruitment on the borders of East Sussex in order to recruit foster carers that potentially the Fostering Service could make available to our neighbouring authorities.

Adrian Sewell

Operation Manager Fostering Service