Building Effective Partnerships

Sarah Tarrant, secretary of Slough Foster Care Association, and Jackie Pape, fostering team manager at Slough Borough Council, talk about coming through difficult times and the benefits of working together.

Background
In September 2010 Slough foster carers found themselves involved in a very public campaign about proposed cuts to their fee payments. Sarah explained that foster carers in Slough had enjoyed a good relationship with the local authority but when decisions were made about cut backs this was put at risk. ‘Foster carers had no way of communicating with each other or with the department and this fragmentation was a barrier to a working partnership.’

Slough foster carers agreed that setting up the association has been a positive experience for everyone. ‘By having a forum for discussion you ensure that issues are raised and prevent feelings that things cannot be changed.’ Jackie believes that an effective partnership requires willingness on both sides to listen and respect everyone’s perspective. ‘Having regular meetings with the association means that pertinent issues can be discussed and we can work together effectively’, she said.

Next steps
The association has established bimonthly meetings with the fostering team manager. At their launch in June, they were delighted to sign up to a local Foster Carers’ Charter, in the presence of the mayor. They were also joined by a local MP and elected councillor who spoke of their support for the new association and their admiration for the important task that local foster carers do in looking after the children in their care.

Fostering success
Speaking of things now, Sarah said: "It is still early days but it was wonderful to be able to stand side by side with Jackie at the recent (Voices Together) conference and say ‘yes, it has been difficult to be a foster carer in Slough, we wish things were different but we are working together to improve things both for foster carers but more importantly for the young people entrusted to our care.’"
Setting up a sons and daughters’ support group: What you need to know……

Eileen Farrell from Manchester Foster Care Association talks to us about setting up a local sons and daughters support group and how this helps young people involved in foster care have a voice in shaping their local services.

Eileen set up the Manchester sons and daughters’ group in May 2010. A foster carer for many years, Eileen recognised the need in her own children to feel supported and have their opinions valued as part of the foster family and this encouraged her to get started.

Supported by other local foster carers who also thought this was a great idea. Eileen used the Manchester Parade day as an opportunity to publicise the idea for the group. Members of the association attended the Parade to spread the word and let foster families know about the new group, encouraging everyone to sign up and get involved.

The group have the support of the local authority which publicise and promote it to all foster families. This includes passing on information about children and young people in families that the local authority is supporting. The association sends personalised letters to children and young people to invite them to the group and to make them feel welcome.

Eileen said ‘Children and young people need effective support and need their point of view listened to. It’s the same for children and young people involved in fostering as it is for adults, they need the opportunity to offload and talk about the issues that come up in a safe environment.’ It is this opportunity that ensures that the association can properly feedback to the local authority and really work in partnership to ensure fostering services are effective.

Eileen says it clearly, ‘In order to support foster carers and their families properly and effectively you have to speak to everyone involved’.

The group is evolving and developing all of the time and now includes children who are fostered. Eileen says it’s now simply referred to as ‘the young people’s group’.

Have clear aims!

Eileen explains that it’s important to have clear aims as these will help to focus your group. Here are some ideas.

- To ensure the young people attending have support from workers and each other
- To formally recognise the contribution sons and daughters make to the fostering task
- To provide access to regular training and learning experiences

Further resources

If you are interested in finding out more about setting up a sons and daughters’ group in your area and want further information contact Manchester Foster Care Association at mfca@btconnect.com

You can also find lots of further resources on our website at www.fostering.net/sons-and-daughters

Or the Leading Our Lives website at www.leadingourlives.org.uk/resources/sons-and-daughters-foster-carers

Q&A In our last edition we asked: How can fostering services form effective partnerships with their local association? Here are three responses:

Both department and association work together as a team on things such as foster carer events.

There should be a social worker attend all meetings who acts as a liaison between the department and the association. This way you feel that there is a partnership and that resolutions to issues are progressing.

Foster carers and social work team should do all training together. Both groups using their different experiences to train others.

Next time: Share your top fundraising tips with other associations
A Stronger Voice training programme

On the 5 July, 15 local association members from across England took part in the co-trainers course in London. This three day course aimed to prepare the co-trainers with the skills, knowledge and expertise they will need to help deliver the five module course that is being developed for local foster care associations and will be rolled out from September this year.

The course was a thoroughly enjoyable learning experience and a chance for participants to get to know each other. Everyone agreed it was intensive yet rewarding journey.

Watch this space! We will shortly be sending out information about the courses and how to get involved.

Smile! Our 15 newly trained co-trainers who many of you will meet over the coming months.

Voices Together: shaping the future of foster care conference

We were delighted that so many of you were able to join us at the Voices Together: shaping the future of foster care conference on Saturday the 11 June. The event was an enormous success and saw the launch of Stronger Voice Awards, sponsored by Favourites Finance, in the evening, in a wonderful venue overlooking the River Thames in London.

If you attended the event and are waiting for photos these will be sent out to you shortly. If you were not able to attend then workshops and presentations are available to download from the foster care association area of the website www.fostering.net

What would you like children’s social workers to know about foster care?

The Fostering Network is developing a new ‘All You Need To Know’ publication for children’s social workers about foster care and the related legislation, guidance and standards. We want to hear from you about what you think children’s social workers need to know to support children in foster care and the families that look after them.

Tell us what you think! Contact the project team at fca@fostering.net

CAMPAIGN news

The Welfare Reform Bill is currently going through parliament. This bill reforms the benefits and tax credits system and replaces it with a universal credit. Many foster carers currently receive some help through the welfare system – and because around half of foster carers are unpaid, could not continue to foster if they did not receive some financial support. The Fostering Network has been working on this behind the scenes for many months with ministers and civil servants, but now we need to campaign more publicly.

In the next few weeks we will be asking foster carers to contact their MPs on issues relating to the Bill. To make sure you receive this information please sign up to the rapid response group www.fostering.net/rapid-response

To read campaigns manager Vicki Swain’s blog about her recent attendance at the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers visit the following link www.fostering.net/blogs/fostering-network/appg-pouncing-minister
Meet your east England regional forum co-ordinators

The east England Forum re-launched on 4 February in Suffolk, with elections taking place shortly after. Both Graham Sim and Anna McDermott agreed to take on the role of regional co-ordinators jointly for the remainder of the year.

Tell us about your roles as a regional co-ordinator?
Anna: It is about helping to build networks, strengthening relationships and improving skills and knowledge.

Graham: I think it is about networking, sharing good practice and identifying poor practice. It’s good to get tips from other associations on a range of topics from corporate parenting to fundraising. It is particularly helpful to see the differences in other areas and how they compare what’s happening.

How would you like to see the forum develop?
Anna: We would like to see more associations coming on board. I think this will help to ensure diversity and ensure that discussions don’t just becomes about local issues.

Graham: I would add that the more associations we can get involved the better the range of knowledge will be. I would also like us to be in a position where we can help foster carers with starting up new associations in the region.

What is happening in the regional forum at the moment?
Anna: Issues discussed include foster care finance - which still differ from one area to another. This has included looking at fee payments and comparing these across the region.

Graham: We have also looked at corporate parenting boards and the importance of foster carers being represented. With cut backs for all local authorities, we are also looking at how associations can gain financial independence through different types of fundraising.

Finally tell us something about yourselves
Graham: I am a trained hypnotherapist.
Anna: I am just embarking on a French language course!

For further information about the forum and to get involved please contact Graham: kazz19@btinternet.com or Anna: aemmcdermott@hotmail.com

Regional Forum NEWS

North west
The forum have been discussing the Foster Carers’ Charter and how to engage other local associations in the forum.

North east
The forum has been discussing partnership working and the Foster Carers’ Charter.

South west
The forum continues to work on regional draft contact form and guidance and discussed medical consent forms and finance.

London
A new regional chair was elected at the last forum meeting and discussions focused on effects of cut backs and the impact on foster care services.

South central
The forum has been looking at tips on building relationships with other associations in the area. Discussions have also focused on how local associations can liaise with fostering services effectively.

Note from the editor...
As the summer holidays are here we at the project are looking forward to chilling out a little and getting ready for September and delivering the new association training modules. So watch this space….. and your inbox of course!

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In the next issue
Charity status
Your questions answered
Effective fundraising
Meet your West Midlands Regional Co-ordinator