West Midlands Foster Care Association forum meeting

Wolverhampton Foster Care Centre
Hosted by Wolverhampton Foster Care Association
Monday 26 September 2011

Attending
Charlie Hooper  Dudley Foster Care Association
Lana Barrett      Sandwell Foster Care Association
Kate Antil       Sandwell Foster Care Association
Bob Yeo          Stoke on Trent Foster Care Association
Delin Dixon      Birmingham Foster Care Association
Delores Collette  Birmingham Foster Care Association
Linda Walker     Wolverhampton Foster Care Association
Lisa Mann        Wolverhampton Foster Care Association
Angela Wainwright Wolverhampton Foster Care Association
Jamie Roome      FCA development manager – The Fostering Network

Apologies
Odette Dwyer     Dudley Foster Care Association

Agenda

1. Welcome, introduction and apologies
2. Update from national project
3. Discussion: structure of the West Midlands forum
4. Feedback from local associations
5. Update on the foster carers’ charter
6. Update on the corporate parenting card campaign
7. AOB
1. Welcome and apologies

2. Update from the national project
Jamie gave an update on current Project activity

- **Facilitating set up and supporting struggling associations**
  Currently supporting the set up of four new associations – North Somerset, Thurrock, Derby and Sefton
  Also supporting a number of established associations including Durham, Solihull, Waltham Forest, North Tyneside and Hampshire

- **Training**
  Five module training course – Stronger Voice Training Programme – will be launched in early November. The following five modules will be available to active committee members of local associations:

  Module 1 – *One Voice – building a strong foundation, working together, planning for the future and shouting about success*

  Module 2 – *Voices Together – developing services, planning activities and getting your members involved*

  Module 3 – *Making yourself heard – communicating effectively and building strong partnerships*

  Module 4 – *A stronger voice: influencing change and shaping the future of foster care*

  Module 5 – *Talking money: understanding financial management and planning effectively*

  The Project team will be encouraging local associations to ask different members of the committee to attend the five modules so that the learning is shared.

  Training materials will be given for each module and should be put in the Stronger Voice Development Pack.

  Further information will follow shortly.

  Delin Dixon, Linda Walker and Charlie Hooper attended the co-trainers course in July and will be co-delivering the modules alongside the Project team.

- **Campaigns/influencing**
  Jamie updated information about the foster carers’ charter and the corporate parenting card campaign. These are both on the agenda and will be discussed

  Jamie also gave information about the Welfare Reform Bill and the Fostering Network’s campaign about the specific issues that may affect foster carers in the proposed changes to the benefits system.
Forum members discussed the regional forum and the intention to encourage other local associations in the region to join to ensure that foster carers and associations have a strong regional presence and are well represented at the national forum.

**Action**
Jamie will send a copy of the Fostering Network’s response and recommendations to the Welfare Reform Bill proposals to forum members

- **Information and resources**
  Jamie gave information about the Project newsletter – all forum members should receive this

Jamie gave information about the website and the intention to move this into the public area of the website – this will mean seeking written permission from all associations to share contact details.

The website will also be revamped to include other useful information for local associations to download.

The changes to the website are part of a broader plan to introduce an online community for Fostering Network members – this will include the opportunity for members to interact online with others. There will be a foster care association area where association members can discuss local issues.

3. **Discussion: structure of the West Midlands forum**

Briefly discussed confidentiality of discussions that take place at forum – discussions and examples used will stay confidential to forum members attending. Minutes will be shared with forum members who attended meeting before being made public to other associations in the West Midlands and put on the project area of the website.

Discussion about frequency of forum meetings – discussed possibility of meeting bi-monthly but most forum members felt that this would be difficult due to other responsibilities and meetings. Agreed that will meet every three months with the option to review after three meetings (6 month point)

Discussed roles of regional chair and co-ordinator.
Lana Barrett [Sandwell] offered to take on the role of the regional chair for the next meeting. Lana will stay in this role for at least the next two meetings. All forum members agreed.
Linda Walker [Wolverhampton] and Delin Dixon [Birmingham] will share the role of regional co-ordinator for at least the next two meetings.

Discussed venue for the forum meeting – agreed that the forum will meet alternately in Wolverhampton and Birmingham as these associations both have access to venues and can arrange child care/crèche if necessary.
4. Feedback from local associations

Birmingham
- Foster carers can seek support when suspended
- Birmingham have a suspended foster carers panel – association has role and can be involved in the discussion about what is happening in particular cases
- Association cannot always share information with foster carers they are supporting but feel that they are better informed and able to offer higher quality support
- Councillors have scrutiny meeting soon – team manager from suspended panel has offered to ‘brief’ association on what to contribute – feel that this is sometimes way in which relationship operates
- Representation of foster carers where there are standards of care issues – difficult and seeking advice/guidance about NMS and regulations
- All social workers – lost mileage allowance

Stoke on Trent
- Set up in May 2008
- About 60% of foster carers in membership
- In last 12 months have branched out to work with children’s services – consultation both ways
- Ask members what key concerns are – will go and discuss with children’s services and then will catch up 6mths later to review progress
- Healthy social events – lots of sponsorship from businesses
- Also run a car park – to bring in funds
- Committee of 13 members – fully committed
- Local authority have sent foster care expenditure list – have to complete every two weeks

**Action
- Discussion about how to use allowances and trust of foster carers

Dudley
- Confusion over identity of association – is it for families or children looked after? Or both?
- Mostly work of association is about organising social activities
- Meet with manager – but no feed back from foster carers about what the issues are
- Feel powerless – membership doesn’t support consultation identity
- Recent discussion with assistant director about possibility of four/five local authorities considering establishing the Black Country Consortium – joining of services/joint delivery

General discussion
Concerns about issues of variation across small geographical region – associations feel that there should be standardised approach to certain aspects – payments, expenses, etc
Sandwell
- restructure of services
- had two pay scales – now have five levels of fee payments
- Supervising social workers will determine where foster carers will be put on pay scale
- Carers will be required to supervise contact (sometimes in their own homes).
- More children in placement with more diverse needs with fewer resources
- Foster carers have to make alternative provision for own children getting to school to ensure that needs of foster children are met. Local authority are not taking into account sons and daughters needs when placing children.
- Only recruiting foster carers who can drive
- Essential car users allowance has been lost for social workers – impact on the way in which they travel and how efficient they are at visits.
- Respite is an issue – don’t get paid holidays. Use terms respite and holidays interchangeably. This can be confusing
- Have identity cards – this is a positive

Wolverhampton
- association is a limited company with a service level agreement to provide specific services to the local authority
- service agreement is up for tender – this will involve all services and funding for Foster Care Centre
- association relies on the foster care centre to do everything – need other committee members to be more active
- relationship with service is more working side by side rather than working with

General issues discussed
Funding for associations and way in which services can use to ‘guide’ work of local association
IRO contact and lack of independence due to being from fostering teams and having established relationships with child’s or fostering social worker

**Actions
- Add standards of care issues/allegations and how these are managed to next forum agenda
- Associations to bring/circulate copy of their finance policies in their handbook for discussion at next forum

5. Update on the foster carers’ charter
Did not discuss due to time constraints

**Actions
Associations to send email to update Jamie on current status of the charter in their area
6. **Update on the corporate parenting card campaign**
Did not discuss due to time constraints

**Actions**
Associations to send update on current situation in their area
Add to next forum agenda

7. **AOB**
   - Next meeting date – Monday 28 November 2011

**Tax thresholds** – discussion about concern that taxation thresholds for the simplified method will not be increased. Levels set in 2001. Concern about foster carers reaching tax threshold and this having an impact on duty to pay tax and on eligibility for tax credits etc.

Forum members gave examples of situations where foster carers were being paid at different rates but not having variable (placement related) threshold and therefore being worse off – either because of single placement arrangements or because of suspension but still receiving a fee payment.

**Actions:**
Associations to send examples of tax issues to Jamie
Associations to read and disseminate the Fostering Network’s response to the proposals in the Welfare Reform Bill – on the website – [www.fostering.net](http://www.fostering.net)