



A Social Worker Guide to the Kent County Council Foster Care Service



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



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Introduction

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Our intention is that this guide will provide a useful reference for social workers at the early stages of planning foster placements and for those supervising children's placements. The guide is for new social workers and those with little previous experience of KCC foster care. The guide attempts to provide information about placement resources, access to services and information on good practice from the various perspectives of those involved in foster care.

The Kent Fostering Service was restructured in 1998 to become a County Service under the umbrella of the County Children's Services Provider Unit based at Invicta House in Maidstone. CSPU is responsible for Fostering, Adoption, Residential Respite for Children with Disabilities, the LINK Family Scheme and Alderden House Residential Children's home.

There are four fostering teams in Kent, two in East Kent and one each in the Mid and West Kent Areas. Line management for the teams is via the County Fostering Manager to the Head of CSPU who reports to the Head of County Services and the Operational Director of Social Services. Unlike Children and Families staff, Fostering staff are not line managed through the Areas. A staffing structure chart for the KCC Fostering Service is on the next page.

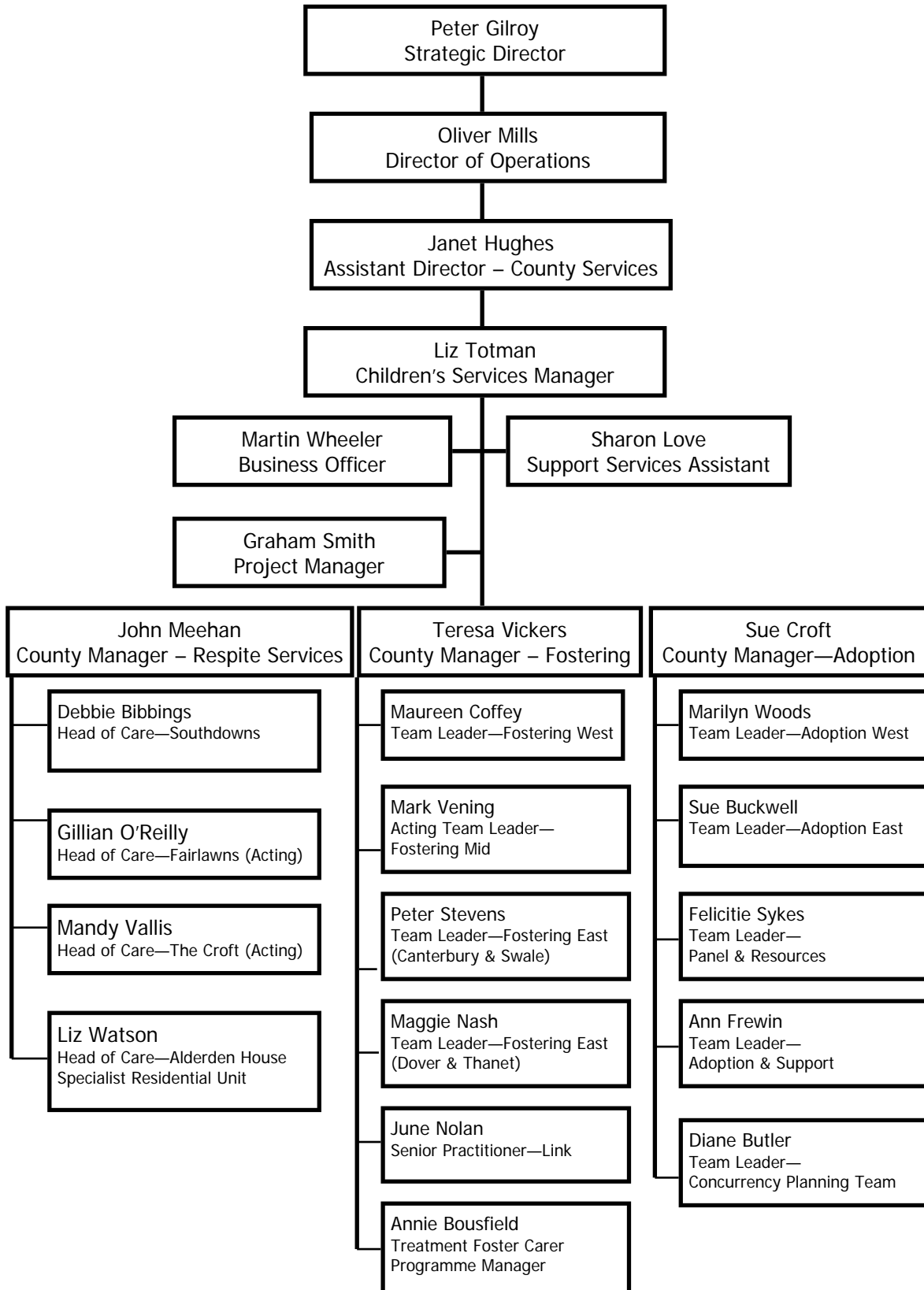
Kent has over 700 foster families caring for an average of 1000 Looked After Children at any one time. Around 85% of these are with non relative foster carers. In the parts of the County with a high proportion of Looked After Children the local fostering team can expect to make around 35 new foster placements month.

Unlike many local authorities with spiralling placement budgets for Looked After Children, KCC has invested in it's in house fostering service which now provides for over 95% of the KCC LAC population. Children can be placed from birth to 18 years of age for anything from an overnight emergency to a period of many years. Foster carers often specialise in particular types of fostering and are specifically approved by KCC Fostering Panels to do so. We strive wherever possible to place children near their home communities to avoid adding to the difficulties faced by all children who are no longer able to live with their birth families.

The development of local foster care resources is subject to a District planning/ commissioning process and for this reason there will be differences in the provision of foster placements in some parts of the County.

The Kent Fostering Service is committed to 'Customer First Principles' and social workers can expect to receive a prompt, efficient and courteous service. Successful foster placements depend upon effective partnership working between the child's social worker, the foster carer, the fostering social worker and relevant staff from Health and Education.

Children's Services Provider Unit Structure Chart



Legislation Policies and Standards

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The 1989 Children Act remains the principle legislative frame work for foster care.

The Fostering Services Regulations 2002 have replaced the Foster Placement (Children) Regulations 1991.

The Care Standards Act 2000 applies to local authority fostering services - section 23(1) (National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services)

The UK National Standards for Foster Care (1999) and the Code of Practice on the Recruitment, Assessment, Approval, Training and Support of Foster Carers continue to be applicable to fostering services.

*Arrangements for Placement of Children (General) Regulations 1991

The Fostering Service Regulations 2002, The Fostering Services National Minimum Standards, The UK National Standards for Foster Care (1999) and the Code of Practice on the Recruitment, Assessment, Approval, Training and Support of Foster Carers 1999.

Sources of Information

www.kentfostering.com

www.thefostering.net/

www.baaf.org.uk

www.fostering.org.uk

www.sosig.ac.uk/socialwelfare/adoption_foster_care

www.doh.gov.uk/choiceprotects/fostercare.htm



Foster Carer Recruitment and Training

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As a means to improve the efficiency of carer recruitment and to enable local teams to concentrate on other tasks there is now a central recruitment team based in Kings Hill. This 'Gateway Team' manages advertising and the initial stages of the approval process on behalf of the local fostering teams.

All foster carers undertake a thorough assessment of suitability prescribed by regulation. A report of this assessment is then presented to the Fostering Panel for consideration for approval. Children may only be placed with approved foster carers unless the carer is a relative or friend of the child/parents. In these cases immediate placement is possible following child protection, health and safety and basic checks of suitability. In such cases a joint assessment report by the Children and Families social worker and the Fostering social worker must be presented to the Fostering panel within six weeks.

All foster carers, other than those recruited for specific children as relatives or friends of the child, undergo basic training prior to approval by the Fostering Panel. This nationally recognised preparation training for foster carers (Choosing to Foster) is being upgraded to reflect the increasing professional status of carers. The training course is delivered by local fostering teams who are usually pleased to include C&F social workers in the courses.

The fostering service also provides a core of four induction courses for all new carers and a range of development training courses for foster carers using both internal and external trainers. Additionally there is a NVQ level 3 training programme for foster carers.

Joint training between social work staff involved in foster care and foster carers is a requirement of the National Standards.

Fostering Panels

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The structure and operation of local authority Fostering Panels is subject to National Minimum Standards and scrutiny by the National Care Standards Commission.

There is a panel attached to each of the four fostering teams chaired by a senior manager. Panels include senior practitioners from fostering and children and families teams, C&F district managers, foster carers, independent people and representatives from other agencies.



Panels meet monthly to consider approval of new foster carers through review of 'Form F' assessment reports. The recommendations of the panels are then presented to a separate 'decision maker', usually the Head of CSPU. Where reports concern approval of relatives or friends of the child as foster carers, the C&F social worker and the fostering social worker who have undertaken the joint assessment attend the panel together.

The Panel also hear applications for the alteration of foster carers terms of approval, reports on matters of concern and carers first annual reviews. The panel provides a quality control function in relation to the foster carer assessment process.

The Role of the Fostering Social Worker

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- 1) Recruitment, assessment and training of new foster carers.
- 2) Supervision, support, planned and unannounced visits, reviews and training of existing carers.
- 3) Preparation of reports and reassessments to the Fostering Panel, investigations of complaints and allegations, undertaking risk assessments.
- 4) Assisting children's social workers, attending reviews and planning meetings, chairing placement agreement meetings.
- 5) Matching and placing children.
- 6) Assimilating and disseminating theory and practice developments.
- 7) Running support groups and training courses.
- 8) Multi agency liaison.
- 9) Managing duty, out of hours support to carers and emergency placements.
- 10) Dealing with placement requests and liaising with social workers.



We are proud of KCC foster carers, most of whom undertake numerous other tasks in addition to caring for children. These include supporting colleagues at support groups, attending meetings with social workers, schools, hospitals and CAMHS, mentoring, supervising contact, attending courts to give evidence, training courses and foster carer advisory groups, and supporting children's families.

Many are looking after more than one child and also have children of their own. When negotiating roles and responsibilities for a particular placement it is important to take account of this. Foster carers are responsible for transporting children but this needs to be approached pragmatically, they cannot be in two places at once. They should not incur costs in excess of 10% of the maintenance allowance for each child on a monthly basis.



Foster carers are not employed by KCC and therefore do not have the same conditions of employment as social workers. They do not receive regular salaries or sickness benefits, but are entitled to two weeks paid holiday a year. They are though expected to maintain their households and family life at a standard that promotes the well being of Looked After Children and to provide high quality child care. This includes actively supporting the child's education and leisure pursuits. Foster carers paid a professional fee by KCC are considered to be full partners in the foster care endeavour. As such they are entitled to the same respect, access to information and expectations of confidentiality afforded between social work colleagues, and can be expected to conduct themselves in this manner.

Foster care is unique in that it seeks to blend professional child care with the normality and nurture of ordinary family life. This is not an easy dynamic to grasp both for social workers and foster carers themselves. It is also the case that caring for children with various patterns of attachment can be extremely emotionally demanding.

This, coupled with the absence of much of the colleague and managerial support and recognition usually experienced in the work place, can sometimes undermine the resilience and self confidence of foster carers. Social workers, often also working under pressure, can sometimes over or under estimate the competence and experience of foster carers and this can cause avoidable difficulties.

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Fostered children often have unresolved issues of loss and attachment and this combined with the traumatic culture shock of being placed with a strangers family may cause them to behave in ways that make them difficult to live with. Foster carers are trained to expect difficulties but for children who have experienced a number of losses or rejections it can take a long time for them to feel safe and secure. Experience may have taught the child that adults are unreliable and best managed at a distance. As these examples suggest, foster care can be a complex and demanding challenge to those involved.

Fortunately fostering social workers are specialists in this field and their role is to assist children's social workers in procuring the best outcomes for children. Fostering social workers will advise and assist in placement matching, support and will attend planning meetings and reviews. Research indicates a clear link between good placement matching between the child's needs and the carers resources and outcomes for the child.

Time spent obtaining and sharing information is a valuable investment. The Code of Practice on the Recruitment, Assessment, Approval, Training and Support of Foster Carers contains a detailed description of the role and competencies of foster carers.



The Role of the Child's Social Worker (in relation to foster placements)

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- 1) Providing accurate and comprehensive information to the fostering team when making referrals.
- 2) Providing carers with LAC Essential Information Parts 1 & 2 and a copy of the care plan.
- 3) Completing and submitting form SS7 to Finance to authorise carers payments.
- 4) Consulting with parents and attending Placement Agreement Meetings before or within 24 hours of placement.
- 5) Negotiating roles and responsibilities with carers.
- 6) Visits to the child (when reasonably requested by the child or foster carers and; in the first year of the placement within one week of the beginning of the placement and then at intervals of not less than six weeks, and after the first year at intervals of not less than every three months.)
- 7) Liase with schools, Health, birth family and foster carers.
- 8) Implement Care Plan including preparations for placement changes.
- 9) Supervise and support carers in relation to specific child's needs.
- 10) Organise LAC Reviews, leaving care preparations and permanency arrangement.
- 11) Promote the child's welfare and development, undertake direct work and obtain the views of the child and foster carer prior to reviews.
- 12) Consult with carers about care planning for children.
- 13) Provide written feedback to the fostering service at the end of placements and for foster carers annual reviews.

Making a Foster Placement

Children's interests are usually best served through carefully planned placements. But sometimes the decision to make a referral for a foster placement is not straight forward and time that could be spent dealing with existing placement requests can be consumed in dealing with requests which are later withdrawn. The Fostering duty social worker is always available to discuss the best course of action.

Each fostering team operates a duty system which is available at all times during the normal working day. A duty fostering social worker can also be contacted via the SSD Out of Hours Service until midnight and at weekends. This service is for both receiving new referrals and dealing with emergencies for existing placements

When a telephone referral is received the duty fostering social worker will ask a number of questions about the child and their circumstances to enable them to complete a standard referral form. This form provides the basic minimum requirements to start the process of matching the needs of the child to the resources and skills of the foster carer. The referring social worker will need access to the child's records to be able to answer these questions and will also need to provide a completed LAC Essential Information Part One.

Once a referral for a planned placement has been accepted a named fostering social worker will regularly update the child's social worker on progress. Fostering teams meet at least weekly to share current information on placement resources and to progress the matching of children to carers. When suitable potential carers have been found the fostering social worker (FSW) dealing with the placement request will advise the child's social worker and arrange to introduce the child, their family and social worker to the foster carers.

Where family crisis has undermined planning and the opportunity for introductions the fostering social worker will provide the child's social worker with information about the skills and resources of the foster carers and an up to date family profile produced by the foster carers. This will enable the social worker to reduce some of the anxiety experienced by the child prior to meeting foster carers.

When a foster placement has been confirmed the FSW will arrange the Placement Agreement Meeting. The content and timing of the meeting is proscribed by regulation. This meeting must be held **before** the placement commences . Where circumstances prevent pre placement meetings, the meeting needs to take place as soon as possible but never more than 24 hours from the start of the placement. As the Placement Agreement Meeting is the forum for sharing information and negotiating care and contact arrangements, children can suffer as a result of delays.

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**Emergency placements must be visited
at least weekly by the child's social worker.**

To enable good matching to occur, no information relating to the child or family should be withheld from the fostering team or the foster carers. Where there are concerns about information sharing this needs to be reviewed with the fostering service in the context of a risk assessment in relation to the foster carer, their family and family networks. In the rare circumstances of withholding information the decision to do this must be endorsed by the team leader and recorded on the child's file. The assessment of the child should be complete and up to date.

When an identified foster placement has been accepted by the referring social worker, the social worker should accompany the child to the placement. Where other children are placed with the carer the FSW is required to have discussed the proposed new placement and obtained the agreement of the other children's social workers.

The foster carers income is dependent upon the child's social worker being prompt in completing form SS7 and submitting it to the Finance section. This is the only method of ensuring that carers receive due payments. In some cases there is an agreement that carers will receive a cheque for £100 from the social worker at the time the placement commences. This arrangement has been made because of past difficulties experienced by foster carers in receiving payments due to them. Omissions in this aspect of placement administration can undermine the foundations of a positive working partnership between social workers and carers.

Visits to fostering teams should be part of a social workers induction process but social workers who wish to find out more about the referral process or any other aspect of the work of fostering teams are welcome to visit the teams or to request specific information.

The Placement Agreement Meeting

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This is a crucial meeting of all involved parties to ensure that essential information is exchanged and plans for the day to day care of the child are in place. It is a requirement of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 that this meeting takes place before the child is placed.

The only exception to the above is in cases of emergency or immediate placements when the meeting must take place within the first 24 hours of the placement. The meeting will be chaired by the FSW who will ensure the foster carers attendance but the child's social worker is responsible for inviting the child, the parents, and if appropriate representatives from Health and Education.

Part one of the Looked After Children Essential Information Record should always be completed and a copy given to the foster carers before any child is left with them. The Essential Information Record Part 2 and the Care Plan should also be completed and copies given to the foster carer before a child is placed but in emergency placement circumstances these documents need to be completed as soon as possible.

The Placement Agreement Meeting is the opportunity to clarify roles and responsibilities regarding contact, the child's education support, transport arrangements, information and recording, health care, special needs and the day to day care of the child or young person.



Maintaining A Placement

The child's social worker or authorised representative is required by regulation to visit the child in the foster home:

As circumstances may require, and when reasonably requested by the child or foster carers and; in the first year of the placement within one week of the beginning of the placement and then at intervals of not less than six weeks, and after the first year at intervals of not less than every three months.

Children almost universally report that their personal relationship with their social worker is of great importance to them.

They are very clear about what they like or don't like about social workers (ask them!).

Where placements have been made as emergency or immediate (Placement Agreement Meeting did not take place prior to placement) the social worker is required to visit the child at least once every week.

On each visit the social worker is required to see the child alone (unless the child is of sufficient maturity and refuses) and to prepare a written report. This is a right and requirement of the social worker but it is good manners to ask the foster carer as well as the child where in the foster home this meeting might suitably take place.

Foster carers too place great value on the quality of their working relationship with the child's social worker. A good supportive professional relationship is often cited by carers as the deciding factor in being able to cope with a particularly demanding child.

Most foster placement end as anticipated in the care plan and carers frequently continue to play a role in providing informal support to the child and/or their family. Foster carers value acknowledgement of their achievements from social workers. Fostering teams will provide placement feedback forms for social workers to complete and these are referred to as part of the foster carer's annual review of their approval.

Sometimes placements end in unplanned ways. This can be a very difficult time for the child and also to the foster carers and their family. Disruptions or placement breakdowns are usually the result of the child's behaviours overwhelming the resources of the foster family. Unfortunately this crisis often compounds the underlying reasons for the child's behaviour, confirming low self-esteem and expectations of rejection. The signs that a placement is at risk of disruption are often apparent at an early stage. In circumstances where carers feel unable to continue living with a child they are usually expected to give 28 days notice that they are no longer able to care for the child. The County Out of Hours Service report that carers often describe unheeded requests for additional support or resources as contributing to the causes of disruptions.

When a placement unexpectedly disrupts it is good practice to arrange with the fostering social worker to hold a 'Disruption Meeting' this is an opportunity for all involved to share their experiences and feelings from both during and after the placement. This can sometimes result in the repair of a placement but anyway is a helpful way to assist the child and foster family to process events and reduce feelings of guilt, failure and rejection.

Supporting the children of Foster Carers

The children of foster carers are an important factor in placements. The success of a foster placement is often related to the contribution of carer's own children. Whilst the child's social worker is an important ally of the foster child, carers own children also report valuing acknowledgement and interest from social workers. Older children are conscious of the benefits and detriments to themselves of being a foster family and a few minutes attention from a child's social worker will often be time well invested.

Complaints & Allegations

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Allegations concerning child protection issues are dealt with under specific procedures. It is the nature of this process that carers often feel very isolated and unsupported and where police investigations are involved this can go on for protracted periods. This is a very stressful time for carers and they should be dealt with in a sensitive, informative and respectful manner pending the outcome of investigations. All allegation investigations are referred to the Fostering Panel and social workers receive reports of the outcomes.

Complaints can range from substantial to minor issues. There are set procedures for dealing with complaints about foster carers. Most districts also have informal arrangements where the District Manager and the Fostering Team leader can review complaints together to see if they can be resolved outside of the formal procedures. If social workers have a complaint that they feel unable to resolve with the foster carer directly they should inform the fostering social worker, the fostering team leader and their line manager.





Detailed information on all available foster care provision is available from the local fostering team. A number of specialist schemes have recently been developed in response to matching needs and services audits.

Emergency Placements

These are for out of hours or immediate placements where crisis has prevented any planning or assessment of needs. They last a maximum of seven nights. The carers providing this demanding service do so on the clear understanding that the child will move within this time period. In most areas this facility will operate as a part of the Emergency and Assessment scheme.

Emergency & Assessment Placements

Districts are working in partnership with the fostering service to develop this provision locally. A high number of children enter foster placements without sufficient planning or information to match their needs to carers resources and skills.

These are designated placements for some of those children and are only available where there is an active allocated social worker able to access an established multi agency assessment group. These carers have been trained to work with social workers to rapidly identify the child's needs. The placements last for a maximum of three months and provide a window of opportunity to co-ordinate a multi agency assessment, convene a family group conference and either return the child home or move them in a planned way to carers able to meet the requirements of the care plan.

Remand Foster Placement Scheme

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There is a designated group of foster carers located around the county whose specific and only fostering task is to provide care for young people remanded into the care of the local authority by the youth justice courts.

These foster carers have been trained by the Kent Young Offender Service and work in close partnership with them and the courts.

The scheme is managed through the Canterbury/Swale fostering team and access to placements is only available to YOS.

Short Term Task Centred Foster Placements

This is the traditional fostering provision for children of all ages who are either in transition to permanency placements, close to leaving care, being provided with planned family respite pending return or are subject to unresolved court proceedings.

Many of the tasks of short term foster carers have been developed into specialist projects to facilitate inter disciplinary and interagency partnership working and training. Within the remaining short term provision many carers have developed specialisms and every effort is made to match carers skills to children's needs.

These include:

- a) Caring for teenagers and preparing them for independent living.
- b) Caring for infants and preparing them for adoption.
- c) Providing family respite care for various periods of time.
- d) Caring for children whose futures are uncertain.
- e) Providing a shared care arrangement to maintain parental care.
- f) Caring for children during care proceedings and preparing them for permanency, long term foster placements, or residence orders.
- g) Mother and baby placements.
(A specialist project is planned for the future)

Long Term Placements

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These are becoming rarer as permanent arrangements to secure the long term future of children improve. It is though still the case that a number of children spend large parts of their childhood with the same foster carers. Where this is seen to be the best way to serve the child's interests the placement is reviewed by the Fostering Panel and the carer specifically approved as a long term carer for the particular child. The fostering social worker submits an updated assessment of the foster carer and the child's social worker submits a 'Form E' assessment of the child with a matching report. The dynamics of a long term foster family are different to those of short term carer's families. The transfer of case responsibility between social workers is often a time of stress for both the child and the carers. It is good practice to obtain a thorough understanding of the role of the previous social worker, the relationships involved and how they functioned before attempting to make changes in the way that the care plan is implemented.

Relative/Friend Placements

Where possible children should be placed with relatives or friends. When the child is subject to a Care Order or an Interim Care Order the foster carers must be specifically approved for this task. Around 15% of Kent's foster carers are in this category. The standards for approval are technically the same as for other carers although there is recognition of the particular relationship and position of family and friends carers. Most fostering teams have a dedicated social worker supervising these carers.

Family Based Respite Care for Children with Disabilities

This scheme comprises of a dedicated fostering social worker and a small group of foster carers specially trained and equipped to provide a series of short term episodes of care to children and young people. The scheme members work closely with the Children with Disabilities Team. The fostering teams also provide longer term family placements for children with disabilities.

Treatment Foster Care Programme

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This specialist fostering facility is for teenagers who might otherwise need to be placed in residential care. The programme is managed by a multi agency team based in Ashford. The team includes clinical and educational psychologists, teachers, social workers and youth workers.



The team, including the foster carers, are trained by the specialist fostering group at the Maudsley Hospital in London and the programme is part of a national evaluation.

The programme is modelled on similar schemes in the USA and KCC is one of ten UK local authorities awarded start up grants. The programme is based on social learning theory and provides a multi dimensional intervention designed to create change in any domain of the young persons life assessed to be a contributing factor to the risk of social exclusion. Individual programmes are designed specifically to meet the young persons needs.

US research indicates that this intervention is helpful for young people with anti social behaviours and non chronic mental health needs. Each young person and their carers follow individually designed behaviour management programmes where reductions in identified behaviours are rewarded with increased personal responsibility and opportunities through a points based system.

Family and individual therapists work with the young person and their birth families. Because of the nature of this intervention case responsibility is temporarily shared with the Children and Families social worker based with the team. Although not driven or underpinned by an attachment oriented theory one of the principle objectives is to assist the young person in learning how to sustain positive relationships.

Placements can last between 6 and 18 months. A referral form and detailed information is available from local fostering teams. Access to this resource is also via the multi agency specialist Alderden House Panel.

Therapeutic Reparenting Foster Care Scheme

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This new development is for children between 4 and 11 years of age where there are identified adverse attachment patterns. A dedicated fostering social worker supervises a group of specialist foster carers. These carers have been trained in helping children to form positive attachments and to subsequently move to permanent homes. Children placed with this scheme are usually subject to care orders and unlikely to return to live with their families.

The carers meet regularly with other professionals involved in delivering the care plan for the child. Children's social workers are an important part of the team. The carers also meet regularly with psychology consultants to discuss the child's progress.

Access to these placements is via a specific referral form available from the fostering team. Applications for placements are reviewed by a multi-agency panel. This is the same panel that reviews applications for placements at Alderden House, Kent's only residential children's home which specialises in an attachment based approach.

Whilst attachment theory underpins much of the work of the fostering service the Therapeutic Fostering Scheme is at the cutting edge of new developments and subject to evaluation by Kent University. Detailed information is available in leaflet form from the local fostering team.

Support Fostering or Day Fostering

This is a facility for the placement of children where it is not necessary for them to be cared for overnight. Most of the carers who provide this service are also approved to provide other forms of foster care as well but this is not always the case. Children using this scheme do not have to become 'Looked After' if the period of care is less than 24 hours.



The Placement of Children Outside of Kent and with Independent Fostering Providers.

The local fostering team will undertake to recruit, assess and supervise foster carers from other parts of the country where it is clearly in the child's interest to be placed away from their home community.

It is unusual for it to be in a child's interests to be separated from their community, friends, school and extended family in addition to being unable to live with their family. The provision of health and education services for Kent LAC is significantly undermined by the presence of very large numbers of children who have been transported into Kent to live with independent fostering agency approved foster carers.

The costs of these placements are often three or four times higher than the cost of local authority placements and for this reason foster carers can receive higher payments. It is the policy of KCC to stop using these placements for a number of reasons:

- a) the ability to control placement quality.
- b) the ability to divert cost savings into preventative services budgets.
- c) the ability to retain and maintain sufficient in house foster carers to provide high quality placement choice near to children's homes.
- d) The ability to support the status of foster carers who choose not to provide services for children that are resource rather than needs based.

Recommended reading relating to foster care

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Signposts in Fostering, Policy, practice and research issues
Hill, M., Ed. BAAF 1999.

Attachment, Trauma and Resilience, Therapeutic caring for children
Cairns, K. BAAF 2002.

Testing the Limits of Foster Care
Walker, M. Hill, M., Triseliotis, J.

Families, Applications of social learning to family life
Patterson, G.R, Research Press, USA 1971.

Fostering Changes by Richard Delaney
Wood 'N' Barnes ISBN 1885473192. 1998

When love is not enough by Nancy Thomas
Available from the Post Adoption Centre, 5 Torriano Mews, Torriano Avenue,
London NW5 2RZ 0207 284 0555 or 0870 77 2199 Advice Line

Testing the Limits of Foster Care
Walker, M. Hill, M., Triseliotis, J. BAAF 2002

Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss Revised Edition
Jewett Jarrat, C. Harvard Common Press, 1994

A Child's Journey Through Placement
Fahlberg, V. BAAF 1994

Part of the Family: Pathways through Foster Care
Schofield, G. BAAF 2003

Serious Emotional Disturbance in Children and Adolescents
(Multi Systemic Therapy)
Henggeler, S.W, Schoenwald, S.K, Rowland, M.D, Cunningham, P.B
Guildford Press NY 2002.

Growing Up in Foster Care
Schofield, G., Beek, M., Sargent, K., Thoburn, J. BAAF 2000