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Activity Days for Fostering

Learning from three pilot events

September 2017

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Background

At Coram we realise that the needs of children in foster care have not always been prioritised and that permanent foster care has been undervalued as an option for permanence.

- Around 70,000 ⁽¹⁾ children are currently in foster care, not all are in well matched placements where they feel settled, secure and are able to achieve their full potential.
- The largest proportion of children in foster care are aged between 10 and 15 years of age (27,000, 39%) ⁽²⁾
- Placement choice is important, finding the right placement is a challenge and we all know that poorly matched placements can lead to drift, disruption and traumatic moves for children.
- Activity Days for fostering aim to speed up and improve the matching process and enable children who do not have a plan for adoption to be afforded the same family finding opportunities for permanence.
- These family finding events aim to provide an invaluable opportunity for approved foster carers, and approved adopters who are open to fostering, to meet a range of children waiting for a permanent placement in a prepared, supported and safe environment.
- The emphasis of the day is on the personal connection, the “chemistry” in human relationships; a chance to make a connection that often gets overlooked via traditional family finding and the over reliance on placement referral forms and written profiles.
- Activity days are an excellent means of involving children and young people in their own family finding.

Project objectives

- The Activity Das Team were tasked with piloting three Activity days for children who needed permanence via fostering. This was in line with Coram’s drive to seek permanence for all children via adoption or, when appropriate either via long term fostering arrangements.

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- Adoption Activity Days are now an established family finding service successfully transferred over from CoramBAAF. The timing of the pilot events was therefore thought to be less of an issue as service users were now relaying confidence in the new service provider.

(1,2) DfE Annual statistical release.

Process

- Activity Days for adoption have become a nationally recognised means of family finding for harder to place children. Transferring the same ethos to fostering did require a more educative approach and hence briefings were held in both London and Manchester to promote the concept.
- As a result, three geographical areas agreed to participate in the pilots in the Midlands, South East and to the South of London.
- These pilot events were funded from the overall Big Lottery grant who had agreed to the change of funding criteria to enable the existing grant to incorporate fostering. Each participating agency agreed to meet minimal costs and expenses, usually in the form of venue provision.
- Each event required finance of around £8,000 to run (event costs and staffing). These events were not intended to generate an income.
- It was important to obtain legal advice before committing to facilitating the pilot days. Children requiring permanence via long term fostering arrangements will generally be looked after under section 20, 31 and 38 of the Children Act 1989. Hence our guidance to Local Authorities was that they would need to inform parents of the intention to include Activity Days as part of the family finding plan. Good practice would be to also include the possibility of attending an activity day in the Care Plan.
 - 1) The first event was held on behalf of a large Local Authority in the **South of England** on 22nd May 2016
 - Eight children attended this event as did three prospective carer households who were open to being matched with a child requiring permanence into adult hood. This event was much smaller than intended and had twice risked being postponed due to the late referring of both children and foster carers.
 - As with the other pilot events there had been preparation for the day with two full staff briefings provided as well as two steering group meetings with staff (managers, practitioners and foster carers).

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- Feedback from foster carers and children's social workers in terms of the preparation support and age appropriate activities on offer was positive, the main criticism, not in respect of Coram, was the lack of communication from senior managers. The notice required for staff and the cascading information about meetings across a large local authority had been underestimated.

Learning

- Senior management needs to be on board pro-active .Potential children need to be identified and prepared much earlier than the four weeks originally allocated. The original date for the event needed to be re-scheduled to enable this.
- Social workers need more support to understand this family finding concept as the fostering sector is less familiar with this family finding model.
- Communication across all teams is crucial, notably between the childcare and fostering teams who are perhaps not as closely linked in with the adoption teams
- Some young people will always decide not to attend on the day, particularly adolescents.
- Higher numbers of carers need to be referred as placements become occupied via emergency placements if vacant in the week preceding the event.
- Consistency of steering group members is important to drive progress, encourage referrals and guide preparation.
- This agency did not want to consider IFA's attending and did not want to include adopters who could consider long term fostering as a permanence option. Therefore they had to rely solely on their in-house foster carers who were at risk of having their places filled ahead of the event. Some of these foster carers would have preferred to take on longer term placements. However, service needs had meant that they had been required to take emergency placements.

Outcomes

- A sibling group of two were matched for permanence with long term carers. These children had complex needs and had been waiting to be matched in a placement together for a significant period of time. They were placed with newly approved foster carers. This was exactly the outcome that the Activity Days Team had been hoping for.

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- We were also able to film this event and subsequently film the foster carers who were matched with these siblings. This then became a useful promotional link for both foster carers and professionals.

View at [Foster carers discuss the benefits of Coram's Activity Days for Fostering - YouTube](#)

- 2) The second event took place in the **West Midlands** region on 3rd December 2016. This event was a shared initiative between two neighbouring Local Authorities. A service level agreement was also initiated to enable independent fostering providers to refer foster carers who met the permanency criteria (preferred providers).
 - The fourteen children who attended on the day included nine single children, two sibling groups of two and one sibling group of three. Ten prospective fostering families attended on the day.

Learning

- In contrast to the other two pilot events there were no new matches for the children, however four children are now in permanent placements as their existing carers made the commitment to be matched with their placed child on a long term basis. This was deemed to be a successful outcome by all those agencies involved.
- The steering group also worked well, there was good leadership and both Agencies worked closely together.

Feedback

“There was a good range of activities, and I think that most of the children and young people really enjoyed them. Being able to meet children directly makes it so much more real, you appreciate the children for who they are, rather than just in a written placement referral form”

“I was concerned that my child would not want to stay but he did really well.”

“‘R’ really enjoyed herself – face painting, tattoos, hook-a-duck and balloon animals. It was a very good event, it was discreet. The buffet was very nice. It was also a chance to talk to the social workers and other foster carers.”

“A’ had fun with her new social worker which was useful. Some good possibilities which she was positive about.”

“It was an interesting day; the children did enjoy the day. They loved playing the different games, they had fun. They played with other children in care which I believed helped them to understand that they are not the only children in care. The children really enjoyed the entertainment and the food was lovely!”

“It was a very positive experience, all positive, we gained loads.”

Questionnaire feedback received from foster carer households participating were as follows in terms of rating the event;

Excellent; 3 Good; 9 Neutral; 0 Poor; 0

- Foster carers relayed the additional benefit of feeling “involved and empowered” in the plan for the child that they were caring for on a short terms basis.
- The overall feedback has been very positive, whilst most felt initially worried and nervous, during and after the event everyone felt the day to have a ‘natural’ feel to it and a fun atmosphere. The children appeared to enjoy the day and there has been no negative impact reported after the event.
- Follow up questionnaires from children also highlighted the benefit of children attending and being able to meet other children in a similar situation.

Learning

- Further preparation to be undertaken with some of the children and foster carers in terms of the purpose of the day.
- Overall preparation of foster carers required more attention; some still seemed unsure as to the concept of the day.
- Again, the pressure on agencies to utilise vacant carers can minimise the matching opportunities for children. Carers too become frustrated as they wish to hold out for a well matched placement and were keen to participate in the Activity day as a means of seeking a good match for their family.

- 3) The final pilot event took place in **Berkshire** on 4th March 2017
 - This event was initially to include four agencies; however the lead agencies and benefactors in terms of outcomes were essentially Slough,

Reading and Maidenhead. Preferred providers in terms of Independent fostering agencies also participated.

- Nine children attended this event as did twelve fostering households.
- The outcomes were very good in that seven children were linked with a family and over 70% of children who attended were subsequently matched.
- This event had an average age of ten for those young people attending with children ranging in age from nine to fourteen.
- Case study examples have been provided by Slough Children's Service Trust (attached)

"There was plenty of preparation for this event received in good time to prepare children. On the day the briefing was thorough and clear, lots of thought had gone into the planning of appropriate activities and resources, well done"

"The briefing meeting beforehand was very useful. It helped me gain a better understanding of the process particularly as I was a new FC!" BC Foster Carer

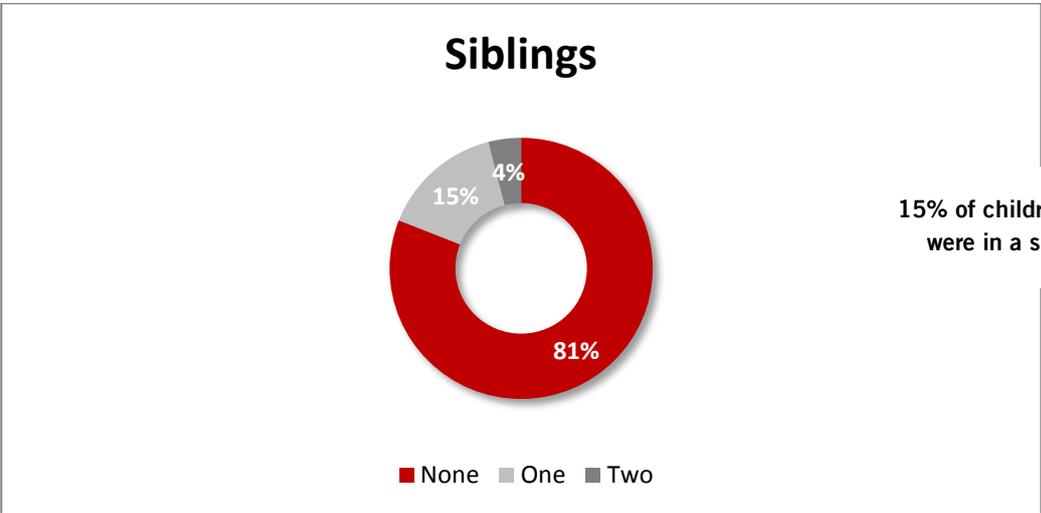
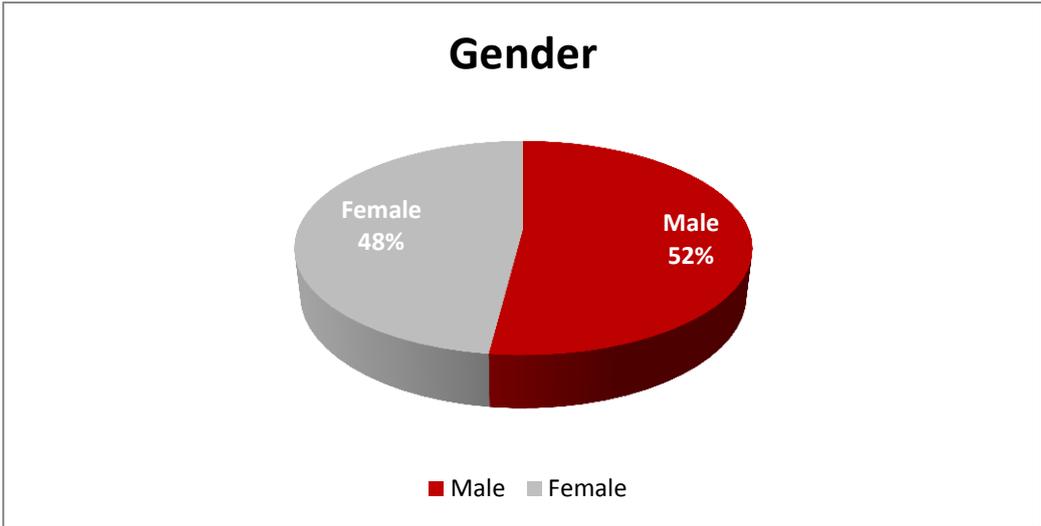
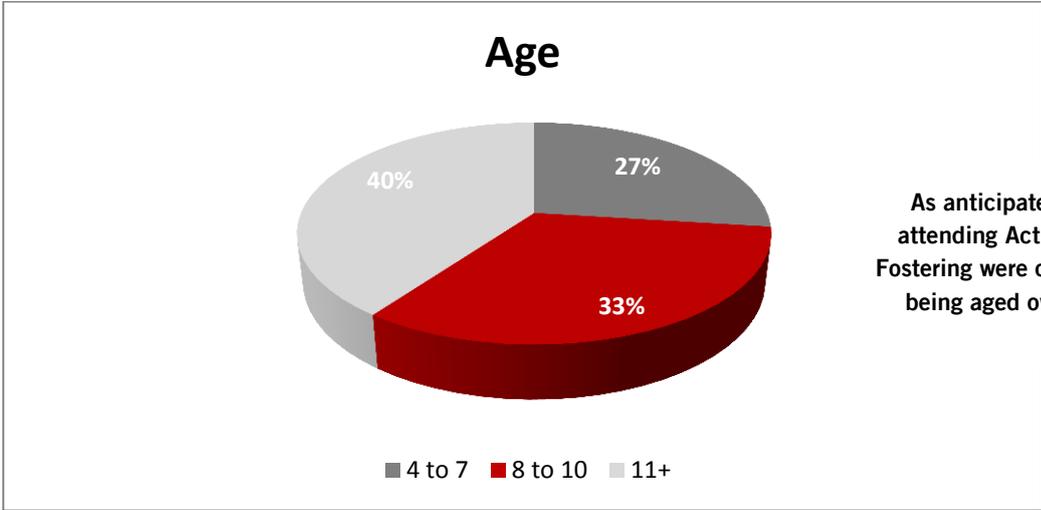
"The slough children who attended found the day to be a positive experience, all engaged in play with a variety of potential carers. It was invaluable for them to have their current carers there for support and reassurance. All the children coped well with the day and feedback that they had enjoyed themselves. Following the day all the children had at least two expressions of interest, there was good 'chemistry' between the children and the adults who attended" Family Finder

Learning

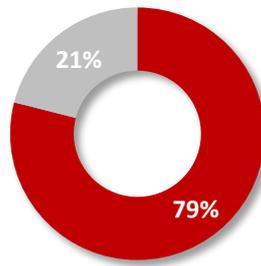
The learning on this occasion which was owned by the Agencies was in terms of;

- The need to ensure consistent and timely follow up with external protocols in terms of the timeliness of following up links with external agencies and IFAs.
- To manage foster carers expectations if links do not progress.
- To agree on what information will be shared about foster carers with external agencies including IFA's.

OVERALL ANALYSIS AND BREAKDOWN OF CHILDREN ATTENDING THE THREE PILOT ACTIVITY DAYS FOR FOSTERING

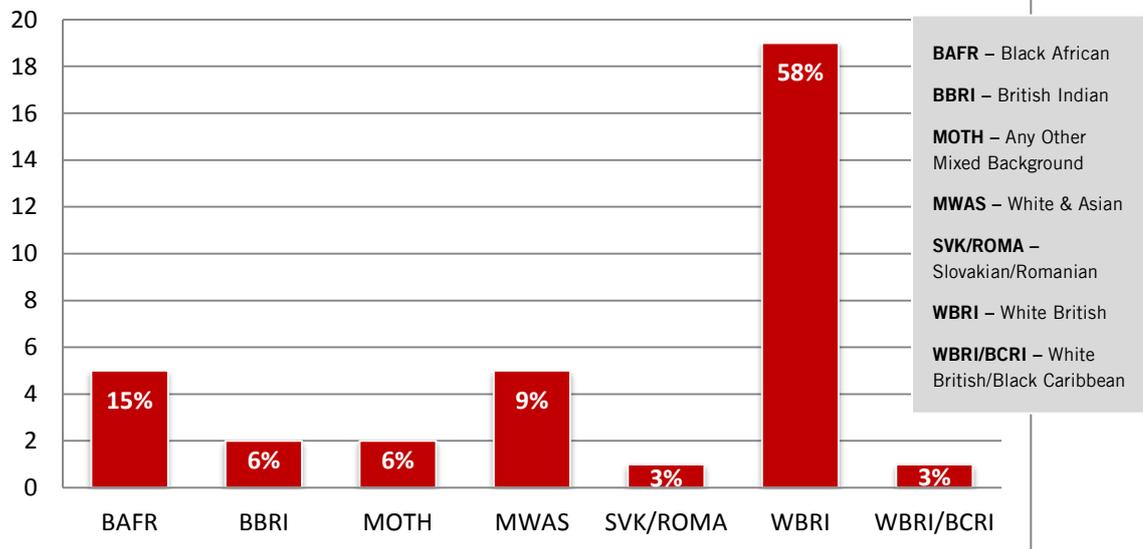


Disability

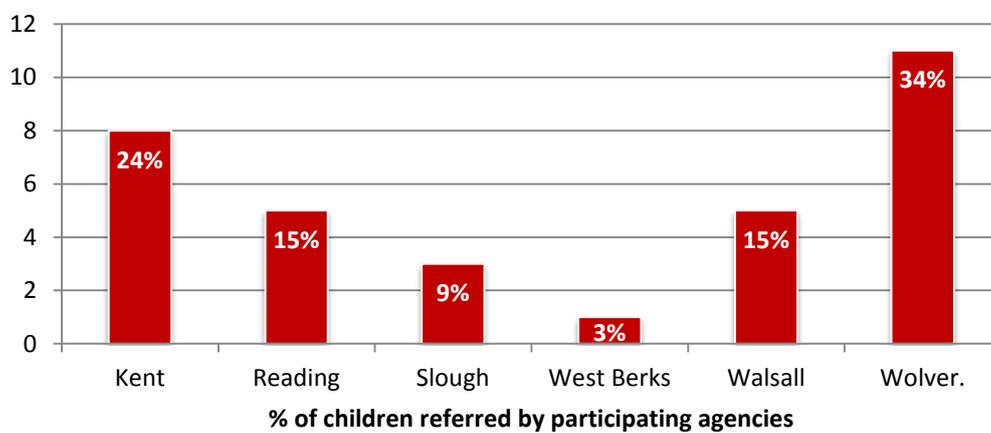


■ No ■ Yes

Ethnicity



Local Authority



Key learning from the three pilot events

- Each event was very different in terms of the outcomes and learning, however where agencies are open to utilising the independent fostering sector and neighbouring Local Authorities from within their region a higher matching rate is achieved.
- Future events would need to be cost effective and agencies fully signed up to an agreed post event policy for planning placement moves between authorities and IFAs as well as an agreed protocol for the sharing of information about foster carers subsequently linked with children.
- Young people identified for placements should be able to move in a timely way. Bureaucratic delays caused by agencies not working together detracts away from the ethos and benefit of young people being involved in their own family finding.
- Act on the fact that children will be significantly older than those children attending adoption events when preparing and managing fostering events. Preparation needs to be appropriate for young people who need to be more actively involved in their own family finding. Existing preparation materials will need to be further revised for young people over the age of ten.
- All future events should encourage the attendance of foster carers own children and existing placed children. This worked very well in practice and some excellent outcomes were noted due to the interactions between young people awaiting a permanent placement and existing placed children of a similar age.
- A benefit for agencies was that some existing short term placement vacancies subsequently became vacant and able to be utilised again for emergency placements.
- None of the Agencies invited approved adopters who were also open to fostering on a permanent basis, despite the fact that they believed that there were surplus adopters who may have wanted to attend.
- Foster carers made good use of the events to seek suitable matches for current long term vacancies by encouraging their own children (birth or placed) to attend. This was a good opportunity for both the foster carers and the child's social worker to observe the interactions between children and inform themselves about the potential suitability of the proposed placement.
- The writing of profiles for both children and foster carers is not as well established as practice within fostering as it is in adoption. Agencies are doing a disservice to their own foster carers if they do not have an up to date profile (or a profile at all). The independent providers routinely provided carer profiles to the Local Authorities to share.

What next?

- Two further briefing sessions for Fostering Agencies are planned, one in London and one in Manchester this Autumn.
- Our aim is to create an awareness of this model of family finding amongst both the IFAs and local authority sectors.
- To further involve children in their own family finding would require a child friendly profile of potential families to be shared ahead of the event and incorporated into the preparation.
- Geographical regional areas would work best with agreed service level agreements fully in place to manage the finance arrangements, placement expectations and post event protocol for transfer.
- Activity days could also be piloted to provide a step down from residential service for those children who are waiting to move to family based care. Robust post placement support would be required for these experienced carers.
- To continue to put the spotlight back on the fostering sector and encourage agencies to provide the same level of service and support to children and their carers who require permanent arrangements.

CASE STUDIES PROVIDED BY SCST (Slough Children's Services Trust)

SCST utilised the opportunity of referring children to the activity day in the hope that permanence could be secured for children requiring secure long term fostering into adulthood.

These case studies provide insight in to the outcomes for three children who have since moved and settled into their new families, their own perspectives on the day and the close working relationship between the previous and current foster carers. The importance of inviting independent fostering provider carers can also evidenced.

MILES

Miles had been looked after for approximately 6 months having been removed from his mother's care due to chronic neglect halfway through the court proceedings. Described by his family finder as both charming and self-conscious he had experienced considerable neglect which impacted on his confidence. Miles had been placed with short term carers and was their first placement and Miles knew that it was a temporary placement. Since the Activity Day, Miles has settled well into his new home, he has fed back that he found the activity day 'fun' and that he is 'really happy to have found C(new carer)'. His previous carer completed a 'wish you well' video for him and was very involved in both the introductions and the move. Both sets of carers have remained in touch.

ANNA AND BELLA

Anna and Bella were removed from the care of their parents following a serious conviction against one parent as well as chronic neglect and the inability of the remaining parent to protect. Anna and Bella had complex therapeutic needs and various specialised assessments were undertaken. The assessments and the court found that the children needed carers with a very specific skills set including that they should be placed together and to be placed with male and female carers. Due to protracted court hearings the children remained with short term carers for two years prior to being placed with these their long term carers. Both children really enjoyed the activity day and Bella particularly was noted to 'come out of his shell' and really engage with the activities. There was a noticeable and immediate chemistry between the prospective carers and the children and they spent quite some time practising their circus skills together. The carers are from an independent fostering agency and have therapeutic parenting skills as well as the female carer having a counselling background.