In May last year, a working group met for the first time to look at ways in which Children’s Services could work more closely with foster carers. The group consisted of three foster carers, managers from Children’s Services, a social worker and a representative from the Fostering Network.

There were two areas identified, these were:
1. Channels of communication between foster carers and Children’s Services.
2. How to make the team around the child more effective and consistent.

**Initial Make Up**

The first meeting of the working group/partnership took place in September last year. A foster carer was invited from each of the support groups of Norwich, Great Yarmouth, North Walsham, Thetford and Kings Lynn. These foster carers can listen to issues and concerns at group meetings and feed these back to the partnership, these can then be resolved and then discussed back at Support Group, a line of communication. Children’s Services were represented by Peter Ronan, Martyn Lovett and Mike Woodward.

**Progress**

Since that initial meeting, we have worked on our terms of reference and agreed these, the full document can be seen on the NCC website but the key aims of the group is listed below. The rest of the document provides detail on how we should work together, who should be involved and on what basis.

**Aims**

a. Maximise the welfare of children in our care through the promotion of good practice and partnership working. To adopt a culture of continuous improvement, to offer ideas on new and innovative ways of working. The clear objective being to achieve a better outcome for every child involved in the care system in Norfolk.

b. Promote working partnerships though facilitating good communication.

c. Create opportunities for children and young people to meet together for the purpose of growth and development through activity and learning.

d. Create opportunities for the team around the child to meet together for the purpose of growth and development.
**Working Groups**

To achieve the aims that we have stated, it was decided that there needed to be a number of working groups established. These would work on the areas of greatest importance and would again involve foster carers and representatives from Children’s Services, maintaining the ethos of partnership working. I will list these below and describe briefly what has happened so far.

- **Team around the Child**

This group has been established and is led by a foster carer member of the Advisory Partnership. It is made up of four foster carers and four members from Children’s Services. The group has just met for the second time and has discussed delegated authority, from which it has been agreed that all foster carers will receive a copy of BAAF “Devising a Placement Plan”. In this document, there is a comprehensive list of examples regarding delegated authority that can be used to help foster carers and social workers discuss, decide and agree on expectations. It could also be used to trigger specific questions that haven’t been listed. The group is also looking into ways of working together with more respect and understanding of each other’s roles and opinions, to minimise conflict and instability between working relationships, and therefore minimise any negative effect this may have on the children that we look after.

- **Continual Professional Development**

This working group covers training and has also been looking at foster carers maintaining a portfolio similar to that which social workers have to do to prove a continuous cycle of learning. This group has also met twice and is led by a foster carer member of the Advisory Partnership; there are in total 6 foster carers involved from a wide geographical area across the county and representing different areas of fostering expertise. Sarah Hunter, (Learning and Development Consultant) and Suzy Holman, (Family Placement Team Manager) completes the group. The group plans on meeting every 2-3 months and so far has examined feedback from the Foster carer Conference, begun work on developing a foster carer portfolio of continual professional development and is beginning work on planning and setting up a new Introductory Course covering fostering basics. This course will be run by foster carer mentors, geographically located and in small informal groups. An additional role of the CPD group is to inform the work of the foster carer training group which is made up of carers who will be trained as sessional workers, delivering training on courses and/or mentoring in small groups or on an individual basis. All queries regarding any aspect of training or continual professional development can be passed on to any member of the group or via network groups.

- **Support Groups (including social events)**

This group is due to meet for the first time on the 15th April, it is led by a foster carer who has recently joined the Advisory Partnership, the foster carer members have been recruited from those who expressed an interest in this area at the conference in December. The duty team who are based at Norwich and Kings Lynn are also involved with this group as they have done excellent work with the Support Groups and will be invaluable in helping this group to develop.
• **Kinship Foster Care**

A kinship foster carer attended the Advisory Partnership meeting for the first time at our last meeting. Although we initially thought that a working group would be required for this area, it may be that it is best served by having its own Support Group, this was discussed at the meeting. It was agreed that Peter Ronan and the kinship foster carer would discuss need and report back to the group on the requirements.

• **Education/Virtual School**

The working group for this area was discussed at the Advisory Partnership meeting, Peter Ronan had spoken with the Virtual School about the Advisory Partnership. It was decided that the best way forward was for a member of the Advisory Partnership to sit on the Board of the Virtual School to facilitate communication. By doing this, there is no need to set up a separate working group.

• **Panel Advisory Group (PAG)**

PAG is a meeting of panel chairs, panel advisors and fostering team managers, chaired by Peter Ronan. In future, a representative of the Advisory Partnership will become a member, to present foster carers’ views and perspectives.

**Openness**

In our terms of reference, we have described how the minutes from our meetings, at both the partnership and each of the working groups, will be published for all to see. Where there are issues of confidentiality, the names will be removed but all the information and discussion points will be open to all foster carers and staff in Children’s Services.

**Next Steps**

1. The working groups have to clearly define the objectives that they are going set for the coming year and how these are going to be achieved.
2. There may be a need to get more foster carers involved in our teams.
3. In the coming months we plan to develop our own website.
4. This year’s conference, the theme that we have discussed for this is ‘one service’, a conference for both foster carers and social workers.
5. Invite more children’s services people to join our groups, including the Advisory Partnership.
Summary

I hope that we have established something here that will deliver benefits to all, most importantly to the children in our care, as stated in our terms of reference. I hope that by working in partnership, improving the way that we work together that it will also make things easier for us all.

At our last meeting on the 11th March we had the Director of Children’s Services, Sheila Lock in attendance, she has indicated that she will attend our meetings as regularly as possible and is firmly behind what we are trying to achieve.

It sometimes feels like progress is slow but having written all this down a reasonable amount has been achieved in a short time. I hope that through the Support Group network that we can involve lots of foster carers in what we are doing and that issues that concern foster carers can be dealt with.

I would like to emphasise that we are not a Foster Carer Association, that we have set ourselves up to achieve the aims as set out in the terms of reference. The last thing that this group needs to deliver is something that is unsustainable, we will consistently need to be introducing new people into the groups, to ensure that the enthusiasm for making improvements in outcomes and the way that we work together continues.

Current membership of the Fostering Advisory Partnership

Foster carers:

Sharon Donoghue – Network group member for Norwich
Natasha Samways – Network group member for Thetford / member of the Team around the child
Pam Weyer – Network group member for North Walsham/Lead foster carer Team around the child
Anne Ritchie – Network group member for Kings Lynn/Lead foster carer CPD working group
Steve Ginn – Lead foster carer Support groups and social events
Julie Spinks – Network group member for Great Yarmouth/ Lead foster carer for Virtual School
Anja Grau – Representing Kinship foster carers
Mark Buckle – Chair of Partnership
Kevin Martin – Member of the Corporate Parenting Board

Independent:

Antonella Parker – Fostering Network

Children’s Services:

Peter Ronan – Head of Social Work Resources
Martyn Lovett – Fostering Team Manager
Michael Cox – Manager of Independent Reviewing Team
Sheila Lock – Interim Director of Children’s Services.