Sons & Daughters Week

Sons and Daughters week is an annual initiative which is organised to show recognition of the valuable contribution that foster carers’ own children make to the fostering task. The Belfast Trust’s Sons and Daughters Week 2012 successfully ran from Monday 22nd October to Friday 26th October. A wide range of exciting and interactive activities were organised for this week and over 50 children of all ages and their parents were able to attend these events. A number of activities were organised for younger children including a trip to the Belfast Zoo, a Fire Station Tour, and a craft workshop. There was also a trip to Streamvale Farm to meet a little piglet called ‘Babe’ who was found wandering the streets of Belfast before being successfully ‘fostered’ by one of farms adult pigs. A range of new activities for older children was also organised for this year’s event following feedback from a Sons and Daughters support group who advised that they, and other children of their age, would be interested in attending activities. These events included a ‘Night at the Museum’ which included a torch light tour of the museum, horse-riding at Knockbraken, the chance to watch the Belfast Giants play and a trip to the Halloween Scream Park which was organised by the Belfast Activity Centre. As a result of the success that this year’s Sons and Daughters Week it is hoped that the event will run again in October 2013 to continue to recognise the key role that the Sons and Daughters of foster carers play and to reward them for their hard work and dedication to the fostering task. We look forward to seeing you Sons and Daughters next year for another busy week of enjoyable events.

Joanne Martin, Student Social Worker

Christmas Coffee Morning, Belfast Castle, 2012

We once again had the opportunity on the 7th of December to meet up at Belfast Castle to bring in the festive season with our annual coffee morning. Belfast Castle was dressed in its seasonal finest and the fires lit to get us all in the Christmas spirit. Spiced drinks gave us the chance at the start to do all our catching up and sopping of Christmas cards and greetings. As usual the string quartet from St Malachy’s School welcomed us and Lesley Walker, Co. Director, Belfast HSC Trust, addressed those assembled and thanked all for the amazing commitment and hard work they have put in, to give children homes in fostering in the last year. Then on to the main event of the reception.

Sadly the passing on of carers during the year was recognised. Mr Al McLaughlin and Mr Joe Fisher died earlier this year and a few weeks ago Mrs Ann Kealey passed away. Two former foster carers, Mr Peter Vallelly and Mr Danny McAnoy also died earlier this year.

Each and every carer was thanked and of course encouraged to recommend fostering to any friends or family they could think of! The morning ended with the giving of the now traditional, M&S festive shortbread and just before we left we were treated to carol singing by the choir of Our Lady’s Deanby Street Primary School. No thank you could be big enough but we enjoyed a Merry Christmas as a Fostering Service once again and wish everyone a Happy & Healthy 2013.

Belinda Ballard

The Christmas Parties 2012

December the 6th and 7th saw us once again at Dundonald Ice Bowl for the wider Fostering Families Christmas party for all Belfast Trust. The wee ones enjoyed running and climbing in the ball pits and slides of Indiana Land, whilst young and a ‘bit older’ enjoyed bowling. These evenings gave us all the chance to catch up with children from placements current and past and to say ‘look how you’ve grown in the last year’, or ‘how are things going?’ It was nice to just take time to have a chat and be looked after by the Ice Bowl Staff.

The winners of the Christmas Card Competition were announced and received their prizes. Congratulations to Shannon (aged 9) and Michael (aged 11) for your great designs!

Once again the highlight of the evening was Santa arriving with selection boxes for all and to whip up the Christmas anticipation that bit more. Ho Ho Ho!

All that was left to say was see you same place, same time, next year!

Belinda Ballard

Hello again and welcome to this Christmas edition of the Fostering issue. It’s hard to believe that another year has gone by and Christmas is upon us once again! It’s been a great year in Fostering, from celebrating the achievements of children and young people in foster care at the Titanic building earlier this year to acknowledging the work of foster carers at the Lord Mayor’s reception. We recognised the role of foster care’s own children during Sons and Daughters Week and again celebrated a number of awards to individual foster carers and to the Fostering Service as a whole.

As usual we’ve had another really busy year in recruitment with many different activities to encourage prospective carers and as you will see there are lots more planned for the coming year! We’ve had a packed training programme too and you can read about some of the different courses carers have attended in this magazine. You can also read about exciting new developments in Kinship Fostering and in particular their partnership with Extern which is proving to be very successful.

As we go in to 2013 we look forward to developing initiatives within recruitment and also in valuing our existing foster carers.

I do hope you enjoy reading this magazine. On behalf of the Fostering Service I wish you and your family a very merry Christmas and a happy and peaceful New Year!

Helen Bell
In the Autumn issue we drew attention to the new Extern Project which was linking up with the Kinship Team in September 2012. We are pleased to report that the Project is now up and running and has been well received by both our relative carers and field work colleagues. To date the Extern team has engaged with 14 families including 19 young people aged from 8 years to 17 years. The team has offered a range of supports including individual support to the young people and their carers. This has included peer art work sessions, workshops in radio broadcasting, branding a band and recording a song. There are plans to offer the young people other activities including DJ lessons, personal drumming sessions, art workshops, beauty and hair sessions and a live music and festive treat.

We in the Kinship team are delighted that the Project has been so well received and has made excellent progress in such a short period of time. One of the Project’s recent events was the Christmas Creative Day for our short and long term family carers. This took place on 27.11.12 and was well attended. The families were invited to enjoy the event with music, art and a host of other activities. Good food was also provided! Our Kinship carers are also invited to the Trust’s Christmas parties held at the Dundonald Ice Bowl and like last year we are expecting a good turnout. Must also mention our coffee morning at Belfast Castle.

A further Core Issues Training programme was held in October and was once again well attended. The carers were enthusiastic and fully engaged with the trainers Caroline Calderwood and Claire Kelso. The Kinship team continues to encourage our carers to participate in the range of training programmes that are available to them. We hope to report even greater take up of the training opportunities in future issues.

The Kinship team continues to develop and with the additional staff we aim to make progress in completing assessments and the registration of all our long term relative carers. A major development for us has been the new Kinship Standards which have been issued by the Department. There is no doubt that their implementation will present new challenges and demands; however in working closely with our field work colleagues we are sure that these will be surmounted.

In the meantime all in the Kinship team and Extern Colleagues would like to take this opportunity to offer all readers a happy Christmas and a prosperous and successful 2013.

Michael Maguire

**PROFILE OF CARERS**

**Ronald ‘Roxy’ Stephenson**

I have been a foster carer for over 10 years. During this time I feel my rewards have come from many of the professionals who have supported my husband and I in a very challenging and difficult role. Social Workers who go the extra mile to ensure a placement works to the best of their ability. Health and teaching professionals who are there for advice and encouragement to the young person and carers. Last but not least, other foster carers who listen and support each other when things don’t run smoothly.

I have always been a person who loves a challenge, so I embarked on obtaining my NVQ level 3 in 2010. I felt quite proud of myself for achieving this as I hadn’t been to college for a number of years. Last year I was invited to sit on the Belfast Trust Fostering Panel and I must say this has given me a new insight into the fostering process.

Lately, I have been training new foster carers on the subject of ‘Core Issues’. This has definitely helped my confidence and is something which has made me grow as a person. It’s great to do a job which makes you feel good and enables you to share your experiences and knowledge with foster carers who are beginning the journey.

My oldest foster son is 22 years old and his most memorable quote for me is “I don’t know what I would have become without you”. This kind of makes it all worthwhile.

Jackie Rutherford

**Denise Stewart**

My husband and I decided we would like to get into fostering earlier this year. I had seen at first hand the difference fostering can make to a child’s life due to working closely with a child who had been fostered in my role as a classroom assistant. This truly inspired me and after discussing it with the family we decided to find out more about it.

That was in January 2012. The process took about six months in all, it was very informative and a lot of paperwork was completed! In July this year we became approved foster carers. We got our first placement in August, which was a sibling group, a brother and sister aged five and three years who are from an ethnic minority background. They have a good understanding of English. They are adorable children and it’s amazing how quickly they have responded to our routines and settled into our family. It feels as if they have always been part of it.

Christmas is nearly here and we are all very excited to share the experience with our new foster children!
How many times do you read this magazine and think “Why doesn’t someone write an article about . . .?” How many support groups have you attended and said to yourself “not them again, why are they always the ones who get involved in everything?” Have you ever attended a training course and thought “that could have gone better” or “I wish that had been done differently” or “I wish someone would run a course on . . .”? Maybe you are someone who never reads the magazine, (if so you won’t see this) or someone who doesn’t attend support groups and other events that are organised for us foster carers because there’s nothing of interest to you.

If any of these statements are true for you, now is your chance to change things. New ideas are needed from you on the Trust Training Group, The Fostering Issues Editorial Group and in lots of other places. Talk to your supervising social worker and tell them that you are interested in joining one of the groups – or all of them!

Michael Sharkey
Charlene Thompson

Lord Mayor’s Reception for Belfast Trust Foster Carers

The Lord Mayor of Belfast, the Right Honourable, Gavin Wilson, hosted a reception in Belfast City Hall for Belfast Trust Foster Carers. The Lord Mayor acknowledged the work Belfast Trust Foster Carers do for so many vulnerable children in the city and he said that foster carers were among Belfast’s unsung heroes.

Jonathan Bell, MLA, also attended the reception and as a Senior Social Worker in a “former life” his speech clearly reflected his understanding of the demands on foster carers. The Lord Mayor presented foster carers in attendance with a commemorative medal. This was a very enjoyable, worthwhile morning.

Colette Quinn, Senior Social Worker

Changes in Staffing

Many congratulations to Frank Nicholson who has been appointed Children’s Services Manager for Fostering and Residential Services, replacing Allan Liddell who recently retired. Frank was previously one of the Principal Social Workers in fostering.

You may already be aware that Colette Quinn has returned to her post as Senior Social Worker for one of the support and development teams in the Shankill Centre. Beverley Ringland has taken up the post of Senior Social Worker in recruitment and assessment, based at Pine Lodge. We wish all three well in their new posts.

Sarah Lynas, Student Social Worker

The New ‘Bedroom Tax’

Under the new Welfare Reform legislation which is due to be introduced next April an under-occupancy penalty or ‘bedroom tax’ will come into force. The government states this will protect taxpayers from having to pay for a two or three bedroomed house for a single person. This may however have implications for foster carers who are in receipt of Housing Benefit. Tenants will see their Housing Benefit payment reduced by 14% of their rent for under-occupation by one bedroom, and by 25% for under-occupation by two or more bedrooms. In England and Wales a discretionary fund has been established to assist tenants such as foster carers, disabled people and single parents who may be adversely affected, but no such fund is proposed here at the moment.

The Fostering Network is lobbying the Northern Ireland Assembly on this issue, particularly on the establishment of a discretionary fund. If you are affected by the changes please contact Dickson at Fostering Network on 028 9070 5056. Doris is interested in gathering specific examples (which will of course be anonymised) to bring to the attention of the Assembly.

Sarah Lynas, Student Social Worker

New Online Tax Tool to Help Foster Carers

A new online tool, ‘Tax for Foster Carers’ has been launched to help foster carers register with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) as self-employed. Foster carers are classed as self-employed, and as such must complete their own tax returns.

The new tool will help foster carers avoid potential penalties for wrong or late tax declarations, and it also has an introduction to the ‘qualifying care relief’ tax scheme for foster carers.

You can access the guide and e-learning course on the HMRC website at http://tinyurl.com/8bgfc21
As usual we have a number of children needing placements - short term, long term and respite. These are examples of some of them:

**Unborn baby J** - This little one is due to be born very close to Christmas. Unfortunately Baby J's mother has a number of significant mental health needs. Ms J also has taken drugs during her pregnancy, which may mean that Baby J will have to remain in hospital for 2-3 days after birth for tests and observation. It is expected that a short term foster placement with a family who live in the greater Belfast area will be required.

**Sam** is a 10 year old boy who resides at home with his dad. Sam has been fighting with other boys in school recently and has been suspended for short periods as a result. Sam is a lively boy with a great sense of humour. He has enjoyed periods of respite with foster carers in the past months and has benefited from firm boundaries, a busy routine and someone to one time with carers. A more medium term placement is now required for Sam as his dad is struggling to care for him.

**Joelle (12), Angela (10) Ben (7), Paul (4) and Laura (3)** – these children – all siblings live with their mother in the Belfast area. The Belfast Trust has been involved with the family for some time in relation to their mother's mental health needs and domestic violence and her struggle to provide for the children. The children would benefit from respite with foster carers to help maintain them at home with their mother. Given that there are five children we are asking carers to consider taking one or two of these children for respite twice per month.

If you think you could provide a placement for one of these children or indeed another child please speak to your supervising social worker.

Grainne Nelson