

Fostering Service

Practice Standards for Step Down to Foster Care

Step Down is an approach to foster care where a child who is ready and wishes to leave their Residential home can move to a fostering family in a lasting home. This transition can be challenging, so comprehensive support is provided to ensure they thrive in their new foster home.

The practice standards and guidance have been developed to support practitioners in their roles and help them achieve the best outcomes for children. Children's views are central to decision-making, ensuring their voices are heard and our foster carers will receive targeted training and support tailored to the child's needs.

The Practice Standards provide a clear framework and actionable guidelines, ensuring that practitioners have the necessary tools and knowledge to effectively navigate their responsibilities. By adhering to these standards, practitioners can deliver consistent, high-quality care and support, fostering a nurturing environment where children can thrive. Every step in the process should be followed as carefully as possible. If a match is made before the preparation stage is complete, we should do everything we can to make sure that the preparation work is still considered and completed. Skipping steps can cause disruption and emotional stress for the child, which could affect their stability and long-term outcomes. By keeping these steps in mind, we give the child the best chance for a positive experience and a successful home.

The Practice Standards should be read in conjunction with the Step Down Policy and the National Minimum Standards can be found.

This guidance highlights the importance of collaboration and ongoing improvement, encouraging practitioners to stay informed and adapt to changing needs and best practices. A range of services—including Children in Our Care Teams, Fostering and Residential Teams, SCAYT+, Family Group Conference/Lifelong Links, and Advocacy—work together to support a smooth transition.

This joined-up approach ensures children receive the right support at the right time for a successful and lasting move to a foster family. While the child's social worker leads and coordinates the Step Down process, all listed services and professionals play a vital role and must actively contribute throughout.

- Young person's IRO (Independent Review Officer)
- Family Finding Team
- Supervising Social Worker (Fostering Support Service)
- Support, Resilience and Stability Support Worker
- SCAYT+ (Supporting Carers and Young People Together)
- Young Person's previous residential home (in house residential only)
- Education – Virtual School/School Representative
- Planned Breaks Foster Carer
- Additional support services specific to child – Outreach, Advocate services, CAMHS

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STEP 1

IDENTIFICATION A child considered suitable for a Step Down arrangement and must have a care plan of fostering that is ratified by the IRO. The My Home My Place Finding to begin the Step-Down process.

No care plan of fostering

The **social worker/IRO** is responsible for the change of care plan as per CSC procedures.

Care plan of fostering

A child's care plan should specify a plan of fostering with enhanced support.

Assessment criteria

The **child's social worker** must hold a multi-agency meeting including the IRO, to assess suitability for Step Down using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and Care Needs Assessment Tools to ensure the child has a secure base and emotional resilience for the Step-Down transition.



Step Down Checklist (1).docx

Care Needs assessment

The child should have their emotional health assessed as being either within 2.1 or 2.2.

Strengths and difficulties Questionnaire

The child should have a SDQ score of 0-13. Scores of 14-16 need additional discussion.

Higher scores will not prevent Step Down but must be discussed in the multi-agency meeting to identify barriers, assess suitability, and determine the support needed to progress.

Step Down assessment to be presented to the Children in Our Care senior manager performance meeting (PACT) where it will be reviewed and decided whether this is the most appropriate plan/time for the Step Down process to begin. For any other service areas in Childrens Social Care, ad hoc arrangements will be made to facilitate the Step Down process.

Social worker to make referral to SCAYT+ for advice and support.

Continue with Step-Down

Childs social worker to complete My Home My Place and submit to Family Finding/Access to Resources Team (CLA Placement, LCS tray). **Family Finding** to email the social worker with information for Step Down.

The child's social worker should speak with the child to understand their views and wishes regarding plan of fostering, (**not a move into foster care**), unless already known. Careful consideration is essential with support from SCAYT.

Birth parents to be informed and aware of exploration of move to a foster family.

IRO (Independent Review Officer) should also be part of these discussions, either formally in a CIOC review or Care planning process.

Discussions about a move to a foster family should take place during the **preparation stage**, when professionals can better assess the child's readiness to explore their future move.

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With the child's consent, the social worker should refer to National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) to help the child understand the Step Down process and support them in expressing their views throughout.

**STEP
2**

PREPARATION The child's social worker will complete preparation work with the child alongside of the residential staff. This is to evidence readiness for a move to foster family and the child must want to move to a fostering family. Family Finding may start in this stage.

Preparation Planning Meeting to be arranged

Social worker should arrange meeting no later than **2 weeks** after the identification and confirmation of the suitability for Step Down.

Family Finding/ART, child's social worker, residential staff, SCAYT, school and any other relevant professionals should be involved.



In the Preparation Planning Meeting, a Preparation Plan will be created and be clear on **all professionals' responsibilities**.
Preparation work should be informed by the child's SDQ & Needs Assessment tools. It should be timely, adaptable and responsive to the child's individual progression towards readiness to move to a foster family.

Guidance for preparing and supporting children - direct work



Step Down Guidance for preparing and sup



Child's social worker to hold review meetings **fortnightly**

Use the ongoing assessment tools such as a Care Needs Assessment, SDQ and voice of the child through direct work tools
Direct work will be used as an indicator to track the progress of the preparation work. Clearly evidence the work that has been completed including any barriers children may be experiencing and additional support that may be needed to action any outstanding tasks.

Guidance for foster carer, supervising social workers to prepare carers and ensure they can meet the individual needs of children.



Step Down Guidance for foster carers .docx



Consider when it is the right time is to involve the child? considering the impact, timings, and ways of introducing the possibility of another move.

Explorative conversations and regular visits to the child will help their understanding and empower them to participate in the process.

The child's care plan may already reflect a plan of fostering where the child may already be aware of the plan to Step Down and may be ready to discuss a potential move.

For children who are not aware, a plan should be devised to support conversations, factoring in check- ins with the child to ensure they are fully supported and able to ask any questions following the conversations.

Any Advocate and/or Independent Visitor should be kept informed as appropriate to their roles to ensure they can best meet the needs of child and support they offer.



Child's social worker and residential staff to support the child with 'This is me and my hopes for my fostering family' such as a pen picture/ profile, video, voice clip or PowerPoint. Birth parents may be included (if appropriate).

My Home My Place to be updated.

The social worker will talk to the child about moving to foster care and how families are found. While the aim is to keep the child in their current school, if a move is unavoidable, the child should be supported to share their views.

The preparation stage is concluded when the child confirms that they feel ready to progress with a move to a foster family or a change in their needs determines progression of Step Down is not suitable at this

**STEP
3**

MATCHING The updated My Home, My Place completed with the child is sent to Family Finding/ART team once the child's preparation process is near/completed and Step Down is the right plan, possible fostering families will be identified and matched.

The location of potential foster carers must be carefully considered in relation to the child's current school. A school move should only be considered if necessary. If a move is unavoidable, the Virtual School must be involved, the child supported to share their views, and a support plan developed.

My Home My Place to be completed by the **social worker** with the **child and residential staff**. This is sent to Family Finding team and ART, alongside any additional documents the child has created to support matching.



Family Finding Team to review the MHMP and send Key Criteria Form, to determine the non-negotiables regarding a potential foster home.



Child's social worker to complete Key Criteria form with the child and return.



The foster home search will be a dual process; options may be found within an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). This aspect will be coordinated via ART as normal.

Family Finding Team to commence search.

There will be on-going communication from the Family Finding Team with the child and their social worker to ensure there is up to date information and keep them informed of the progress and any matches. Step Down meetings held by FF/ART will continue to take place to ensure search requirements remain up to date for all children.



When a family has been identified the **Family Finding Team** will inform Child's Social Worker and share the Matching Profile of the foster family.



Family Finding team will inform the Supervising Social Worker and share the My Home, My Place document.



Child social worker to liaise with **supervising social worker** and **IRO** for further information to inform decision.

Child's social worker and supervising social worker to consider a meeting with carers and all the professionals to discuss the needs of the child and create a management plan if required. (Senior managers to be part of discussions. This is to ensure value and commitment to the foster carers, providing transparency to ensure made is a good match).



If a match or more than one possible match is identified, the child should be involved in considering which family to progress with. This could involve the child meeting both families if deemed appropriate.



If a match is declined the **Fostering Family Finding Team** should request details of why it has been declined.



Child's social worker to make amendments to the My Home, My Place/ Key Criteria/Non- Negotiables if required.



Match approved **Family Finding Team** to confirm match with Supervising Social Worker, foster carer and Child Social Worker and send the RAMP assessment



Childs social worker and residential staff to complete the RAMP Assessment in collaboration with the child and informed by other services supporting them.



RAMP Plan Final.docx

The RAMP Assessment will be discussed and shared with the fostering family and relevant professionals as part of the 'Getting to Know You' and 'Moving Home Plan'. It will remain a key document for understanding and responding to the child throughout the rest of the Step Down journey for the child and foster family.



Childs social worker to update SCAYT referral if the case was closed following advice and guidance given.



Supervising social worker complete referral to the Stability and Support Team.

Childs social worker to inform IRO of the match.

Supervising social worker to visit carer and discuss the step-down process and provide information. Link in with Step Down lead who can support.

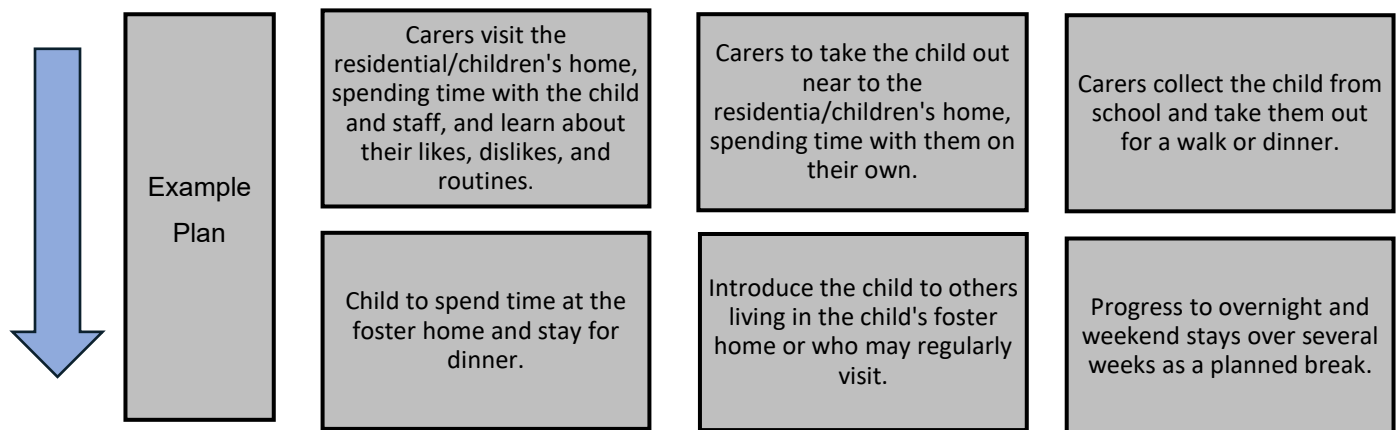
Supervising social worker to identify any additional training the foster carer may need to complete to meet the needs of the child.

STEP
4

INTRODUCTION/MOVE child's social worker and supervising social worker to produce a 'Getting to know you and moving plan', this is a 6–8-week introduction plan to support child to meet potential carers, getting to know them and building relationships before transitioning from the residential home into the foster home.

The child's social worker, supervising social worker and residential staff must work together to ensure a smooth transition during this crucial period of the Step Down journey.	The child's social worker and the supervising social worker will complete weekly check-in's and undertake fortnightly visits to the fostering family and child.	SCAYT to offer formulation session with the carers/network to help them understand the needs of the child and develop trusting relationships.	Include the child, foster carers and their Supervising Social Worker, Social Worker for any other looked after child in the home, residential home, School, IRO, SCAYT, Advocate.
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Week 1 Plan	Child's social worker to arrange a multi- agency meeting soon as possible (no more than 2 weeks after the match is agreed). This is an opportunity to share information, answer any questions, and create a 'Getting to Know You' and Moving Home Plan. The plan should cover a 6–8-week introduction period, but it can be extended, ensuring that there is sufficient time to enable the child and foster family to start relationship building, getting to know one another and provide understanding and exploration of the current and new home. RAMP Assessment tool to be used to guide planning.
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Week 4 Midpoint Review	Review meetings help everyone understand their roles in the plan. They also give foster carers and the child a chance to share any concerns. It's a good time to review how the Transition Plan is going and make any changes. Professionals need to be mindful of potential issues that may present for the child during this process. Planning should also include the identification of further support needs and if the needs require clear guidance and support, measures can then be in place ready for date of move to foster home.
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Week 6-8 Final Review	Review the plan and consider if extensions are needed. If the plan is progressing well, determine a plan for child to move in including moving in date and what is needed to support a smooth transition to their new home. The child's social worker, residential staff will be key in supporting the child to move. The supervising social worker will ensure the carers are fully supported and check in with the family in the evening or the next day and set up the Advice line call.
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The foster family will be supported with expenses and discussion around day care rates for extended days of care and overnights through the transition period to limit any detrimental financial impact during the extended period and ensure this does not present a barrier or pressure point to the relationship building over this stage.

STEP 5 **ONGOING SUPPORT AND REVIEW** Continued review of the Step Down arrangement including ongoing and new needs and support offer to respond to these needs.

Childs social worker will complete weekly visits for the first 4 weeks.
 Supervising social worker will complete weekly visits for the first 4 weeks.
 Stability Support worker will complete fortnightly visits for 12 weeks.
 Residential staff will complete outreach/keeping in touch visits for the first 6 weeks.

Review Meetings
 It is important to ensure review meeting are held in line with the Step Down Policy to ensure ongoing support is provided to the fostering family.



Weekly Reviews
Child's social worker will chair a weekly meeting for the first 6 weeks following the move to review how the settling in process has progressed. A support offer should be implemented promptly to respond to any changes in need. (see support offer on page)

Essential attendees include

- Child's social worker
- Supervising Social worker,
- Residential Staff
- Child
- Stability Support worker
- IRO (for the initial meeting)
- SCAYT+

Ideally school to attend weekly, if possible, any other support service i.e. SCAYT+.



There also needs to be a Looked After Review meeting within the first 4 weeks as part of normal procedure. Additionally, if the child will be moving school, a PEP (Personal Education Plan) should be completed.

Monthly Reviews
 After the initial 6 weeks, a Support Review Meeting should take place at least once a month for a minimum of 6 months recognising the continued need for increased support over an extended period for Step Down arrangements.



Final Review
 Agree if the review of support can then be deferred to the standard 6 weekly multi-agency meetings offered to all our children in care or if further support is needed, then a monthly review should remain in place and continued for a further 6 months.

The level of support should be tailored to meet the individual needs of a child and fostering family, with support regularly reviewed to ensure it remains responsive to the evolving needs. Reduction of support for these arrangements should only be considered following an extended period of stability and where the presenting needs are felt to be in line with a non-enhanced fostering arrangement.

Support Offer for the Fostering Family

Mockingbird Support: Provides wider peer support, shared experiences, informal babysitting, fostering expertise, and direct support from a hub home carer. Dependent on area/availability.

Wellbeing Programme- A benefits scheme for foster carers and their families including discounted activities, self-care and events throughout the year;

Out of hours support- This includes access to both EDT and the Fostering Advice Line. The Advice Line operates from 6pm – 11pm weekdays and 8am – 11pm weekends. This provides advice and guidance to our carers over the phone and is covered by qualified social workers
EDT: 0300 123 672 Advice Line: 0300 123 6724

Planned Breaks may be identified foster carers for additional support and stability dependent on level of need and Children Social Care approval.

Mentor Academy- During the period of assessment, our applicants/carers will be linked up with a more experienced carer to support them over the first year of their fostering journey. The mentor will support the induction to the service and offer peer support both in assessment and beyond;

Informal Buddy Support- There may be times when we link carers up together to offer more informal buddy support. This can be a carer who is experienced in a specific area supporting a carer going through a challenge with the child in their care.

Support Groups- Carers have access to support groups in their locality area, some of which are specific to certain matching areas such as parent and child. These groups often have guest speakers on numerous topics and include opportunities for peer support and networking;

Supporting Stars - Throughout the year the Fostering Service runs events for the sons and daughters of foster carers. This provides an opportunity to mix with other young people who come from fostering households and share experiences, as well as an opportunity to just have fun.

Ongoing learning and development opportunities – All carers have access to a variety of training courses:

<https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/practitioners/training/foster-carer-training-home/mandatory-training-courses/> <https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/practitioners/training/foster-carer-training-home/online-training/> <https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/practitioners/training/foster-carer-training-home/course-index/>

LIFT support- We are keen on our carers supporting one another and therefore when the need arises, LIFT support can be implemented at any stage of the match;

Support from SCAYT+, Supporting Carers and Young People together and Support, Resilience and Stability Support Worker (see below for further details).

Description of the roles for each service.

CHILDREN SOCIAL CARE

- The child's social worker is responsible for the co-ordination of the step-down plan and ensuring that each step of the process is followed to ensure all professionals are working together to support the successful transition of the child to move into a new fostering family.
- Referral to be made to SCAYT+ as soon as step down has been agreed, this is to start thinking about the child's needs and how to support them throughout the process.
- The child social worker will offer an increased visit regime during **Preparation stage** however, it will be determined by the Preparation Plan and what preparation work is required and by whom through a series of regular meetings. Visits at this stage should be a minimum every 2 weeks.
- The child social worker will work closely with Residential staff to complete the preparation work and review it ensuring the child is ready for a move to foster care.
- Child's social worker to speak with the child about any potential matches and ensure the carer has all the relevant information about the child and their needs. Considering a matching meeting with professional to share information between carer and professionals.
- During the **Introduction stage** the social worker will complete weekly check in's and minimum fortnightly visits at a minimum, listening to the child on how they want to meet and spend time getting to know the carer.
- **Ongoing support and review stage** - once the child has moved into the fostering home, the social worker will complete weekly visits for the first 4 weeks and review the frequency of visits based on the individual need of the child and their fostering family.

FOSTERING SERVICES

- There will be a step-down lead from the Family Finding Team, to offer support and guidance throughout the process once the My Home My Place has been received. Information about the Step down process will be emailed to child social worker and IRO.
- Our foster carers will also undertake preparation work to ensure are prepared and ready to care for a child who is leaving their residential home. The assessing/supervising social worker is responsible for ensuring the foster carers have the skills and experience to be able to offer this type of enhanced arrangement and that foster carers are well-trained and supported to meet the individual needs of children.
- Step Down Foster carers will have access to an extensive training provision including an essential offer given below, some of which will aim to be completed with carers before matching.
- Family Finding team are responsible to identifying any potential foster carers and proceeding with the usual matching process providing information to social workers. This will coincide with ART initiating an agency Step Down search.
- The Supervising Social worker will become involved in the Matching Stage when a foster carer has been identified and contribute to the matching discussions/meeting to support the carers along with holding conversations around the child's needs/wants from a foster home.
- The supervising social worker will refer the family to the Stability and Support Team and discuss the ongoing support offered to the family and ensure the support is in place.
- Supervising social worker will work closely with child's social worker to create 'Introduction and moving home plan'.
- The supervising social worker will undertake weekly check in and fortnightly visit to the fostering family during the **introduction stage** and visit weekly for the first 4 weeks after the child moves in, then review this based on individual needs of the fostering family.
- Supervising social worker to attend the reviews meetings.

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS

- The IRO will continue to act as an impartial and independent professional who safeguards the child's interests, monitor the effectiveness of interventions, and ensure that the step-down plan is robust and child centred.
- At the time of the child being identified for step-down into foster care the IRO consider this with the child's views and in line with the care plan. The IRO will continue to discuss this with the child and professionals/carers involved with the child prior to their review. The IRO will either ratify or challenge the care plan to step-down or make recommendations to support this move.
- During the planning and implementation of the move, the IRO will continue to monitor and provide independent oversight during this process of preparing the child and identifying the foster carer.
- The IRO will also be invited to planning and matching meetings. If the IRO is unable to attend, minutes of meetings and profiles of prospective foster carers are to be sent to the IRO, who will then share views.
- IRO will hold a Child looked after review after the child joins the foster family in accordance with statutory guidance. The IRO/social worker will engage and consult with the child prior to the review and seek their views for the review meeting, including who they want to attend and where they want their meeting to take place. Depending on the wishes of the child, the IRO may need to consider the use of series of meeting, to ensure all relevant agencies/professionals are part of the discussion for this review.
- The IRO to visit (if requested by the child, carers) following a move into the fostering home. Child could also request this visit at any time during their step-down journey.

RESIDENTIAL SERVICES

- Contribute to the Needs Assessment and SDQ as part of the ongoing support for the child in their care.
- Contribute to the Preparation Planning Meeting with the child social worker and work with the child alongside the child's social worker to complete preparation work.
- Supporting the child in completion of the RAMP Plan prior to start of 'Getting to Know You' process.
- Support 6-8 week 'Getting to Know You' and 'Moving Home' Plan for the child. This includes:
 - Accommodating carer visiting child at the home.
 - Helping the child to visit foster carer/ family.
 - Emotional containment of child around this process.
- Residential staff will be the point of advice and provide guidance for foster carer and the child over the course of this transition period, so carer knows how to best respond to the child whilst building that relationship.
- For 6 weeks after the move, the residential home should maintain a link for the foster carer in respect of advice and guidance over meeting the child, as placed as previous care providers.
- Attend at least every other weekly Support Review Meeting for first 6 weeks post move. This is to ensure the understanding of needs and for the foster carer to develop their understanding of meeting those needs.
- Offer of continued relationship with the child including visits to the home if this what the child wants, this should be agreed as part of preparation and confirmed in transition planning.

THE STABILITY AND SUPPORT TEAM

- The Stability worker will become involved in the introductions and moving plan.
- Initially, offering fortnightly visit for 12 weeks after the child moves in. This support will be tailored to the individual foster family and child but will focus on responding to needs as they arise both in respect of the relationship building between the fostering family and child but also offering reflection and guidance to best understand and meet the child's changing needs as they settle into the family.
- After 12 weeks, a review will take place to determine if there are ongoing needs that require this support to continue. If support continues, this will be reviewed as part of ongoing Support Review Meetings.
- Stability and Resilience Worker should attend Review Meetings at least fortnightly in first 6 weeks and at least once a month after this.

SCAYT+

Consultation

- SCAYT will hold an initial consultation within 2 weeks of the referral to provide the network with support and reflection space for preparation work with the child and any other support needed for the network. It is likely following this SCAYT will close involvement until later in process.
- Unless still open following preparation referral, a new referral to SCAYT is to be made when a possible match is being considered.
- SCAYT will hold a consultation to gather information and explore needs, completing the Thinking About Your Child Questionnaire with the carer/residential services. Professionals to be included in the initial consultation include.
 - Child's Social Worker
 - Key residential staff
 - Prospective carers
 - Supervising Social Worker

Network support

- SCAYT will attend Step down meetings to support thinking about care planning and ongoing needs (meetings will need to be booked in advance to allow workers to attend).
- Provide their reflections/formulation to support the process.
- Recommendations about individual work/preparation. Carers to be included where the match is felt to be positive.

One-to-one support

- Formulation sessions with the foster carer and residential staff member will be offered.
- Preparation sessions to be delivered with carers and supervising social worker. These sessions will focus on exploring the child's individual emotional needs and psychological formulation and ideas about their care.
- SCAYT will continue to offer therapeutic guidance, support and advice to our foster carers offering 1:1 fortnightly session to the foster carers. SCAYT will support carers to develop their therapeutic knowledge and skills and to develop trauma informed practices, strengthening relationships between the carers and their child and gaining a better understanding of their needs and behaviours, using a range of therapeutic approaches providing opportunities to increase children's feelings of safety, security, connectedness, shared enjoyment, sense of belonging and permanence within their families.

Additional/ Specific Training Offer for Step Down Provision

- Priority places will be offered to Step Down carers on the following courses:
 - An introduction to trauma informed care (1 day)
 - Parenting with PACE (1 day)
 - Therapeutic Parenting with PACE (12-week course- Jan-May in Burnley, Sept-Dec in Preston)

Enhanced support group

- Enhanced support groups will run monthly/6 weekly for 2 hours and attendance will be essential for all Step-Down foster families and will be identified as required in the individual families PDP and Step-Down support plan. Groups will run in the east and central locations. The training element will mirror training offered to LCC residential homes, including topics such as sexualised behaviour, aggressive outbursts, sleep difficulties, low mood and self-harm.
- **It is fundamental for the SCAYT's emotional health practitioner and the stability support worker to liaise regularly around the advice and support given so the carers have consistent messages and support from out fostering service.**
- **Review of SCAYT support** to be completed after 6 months. If support is confirmed to continue, reviews mechanisms must be completed every 3 months thereafter.
- Any decision that SCAYT support is to end must be shared with the child's social worker and supervising social worker as soon as possible so they can determine any impact this could have for the child or foster family and any changes necessary for the support package to ensure that the fostering family and child can adjust to the changes and/ or for support to end.

Education/ Virtual Schools

- It is essential that the child's school is actively involved throughout to ensure continuity in education and emotional support, helping the child maintain stability and a sense of normalcy during the Step-down process.
- Schools must attend meetings where possible and provide updates as they step down process may impact on them in school.
- If the child is going to continue to live in the same area and still attend the same school, the Virtual School may need to be made aware of what is happening as it could affect the child and their behaviours.
- The Virtual School and the school will consider how best to support the child with any attendance issues and devise a plan to improve this as they settle into their new foster home.
- A school move should only be considered when necessary. If a change is unavoidable particularly when the child is relocating to a different area, the Virtual School must be informed at the earliest opportunity to support planning. The child should be supported to express their views, and a comprehensive support plan must be developed to ensure continuity in education and emotional wellbeing.
- When a new school is found, a joint PEP meeting should be held with the old and new school as part of a strong handover. The child, residential staff and the new carers should be involved.
- Contact: virtualschool@lancashire.gov.uk

SPACE HUB - Supporting and Preventing Additional Care Experiences

Formerly known as the **Adolescent Support Units (ASU)** and **Community Outreach**. SPACE hubs will only get involved if and where a referral has been made to stabilise the home if it is at risk of break down and the child re-entering residential care.