

Corporate Parenting Panel

23 March 2018



Fostering Service Report

Report of Karen Robb, Strategic Manager Looked After Children and Permanence, Children and Young People's Services

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview to the Corporate Parenting Panel of the recent changes within the Fostering Service and to provide assurance to Elected Members in relation to the key lines of enquiry (KLOE's) within the Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Parenting resource packs.

Introduction – Context of fostering and the Fostering Service Restructure

- 2 The statutory requirements of the Fostering Service are to provide placements to all those children who need to become Looked After by the Local Authority and their best interests are to be promoted by living within a family setting. This is a statutory duty for the Council who is required to meet its "Sufficiency Duty" which states that it must take steps to secure, as far as possible, sufficient accommodation within its area to meet the needs of children that it is looking after. This is requirement across the Looked After Service in relation to residential care, supported lodgings and leaving care provision.
- 3 The Fostering Service was subject to a formal review of its structure in 2016 to ensure the service was meeting its statutory duties and that the service was more aligned to the wider structure of the service to meet the needs of looked after children. This became a particular issue as a result of the rising numbers of looked after children from 2015-2016 and to ensure the service was able to meet these needs. The findings of this review and recommendations resulted in an implementation plan for the new structure of the Fostering Service, which commenced in 2017.
- 4 The Key Principles of the revised structure are as follows:
 - (a) To create a dedicated Placement Service which is responsible for all requests for children needing to become Looked After to ensure that the service provides a timely and consistent response and ensures it secures the most appropriate placements for children. This includes all types of provision, mainstream foster care, Family and Friends Foster Care and Residential Care. It will also provide the sourcing of external provision for children and young people where this is felt to be the most appropriate resource to meet their needs.

- (b) Directly aligned locality based Fostering Teams to ensure consistent and targeted support is provided to foster carers, which encourages peer based support and promotes community focussed support.
 - (c) These directly aligned teams will also ensure closer links with the Families First Teams where children's care plans are being developed and will ensure a role within each of the Legal Panels.
 - (d) To maintain a dedicated Recruitment and Assessment Team who are responsible for ensuring that the service continues to maximise the recruitment, assessment and approval of new carers in line with the increased demand for looked after arrangements for children and young people.
- 5 The Fostering Service, along with the Adoption Service, have relocated from their premises at Langley Moor to Spectrum 8 at Seaham. This move took place at the beginning of March. Despite some initial reservations from staff the move has gone smoothly and teams are settling in. The facilities are greatly improved and the opportunity to work flexibly will support the Fostering Service staff working more closely with other teams across the County.

Fostering in Durham – The current situation

- 6 Durham County Council are currently supporting 305 foster care families, 246 mainstream foster carer families and 59 Family and Friends foster carers.
- 7 All Fostering households including those carers who are looking after children under Family and Friends arrangements, have an allocated fostering social worker, who provides advice, guidance and support. They will also supervise the foster carers to ensure they are meeting Fostering Regulations and standards to promote the safeguarding and care of children they are looking after. The social worker ensures that each foster carer has a direct supervision session at least once per month which ensures that they are listened to and supported but are also encouraged to develop their skills through training and professional development.
- 8 There is a culture of learning within the Fostering Service and the Service provides a comprehensive training programme for foster carers which includes mandatory and core training through taught courses and e-learning as well as access to nationally recognised courses. Carers are supported within their first year following approval to complete the Training and Development Standards which are a legal requirement.
- 9 The Full Circle Team are instrumental in offering a range of support to foster carers and their foster children. This includes direct support in the form of assessments of children, and consultations and ongoing support sessions to foster carers to assist them in caring for a child. Direct therapeutic work is also provided to a significant number of children in foster care as a result of their previous experiences of neglect and abuse. The Full Circle also provide training to foster carers developing and supporting their needs around attachment and loss, understanding the impact of trauma and neglect and

recognising the direct impact these experiences have on looked after children as well as the secondary impact of caring for a child who presents with such difficulties.

- 10 The Fostering Service closely monitors placements, which are unsettled, and with the Care Team work together to identify and provide additional support to stabilise the placements. This includes support from the Edge of Care Service, which has two dedicated workers to support foster care placements.
- 11 In circumstances where a longer term or permanent placement breaks down when everything has been exhausted to support the placement, a Disruption Meeting is held to identify issues contributing to the breakdown, identify any shortfalls in support and any actions necessary to ensure learning from it. Learning points are disseminated in team development sessions within the Fostering Service and across the Looked After Children Teams.
- 12 All allegations and serious concerns made against foster carers are fully investigated in line with policies and procedures. All foster carers have access to independent support from an Advice and Mediation worker FROM Fostering Network in addition to support available from the Fostering Service. There have been 18 allegations or concerns investigated this year. One couple have been de-registered as result and there are three ongoing allegations. The majority of foster carers have continued to foster following the satisfactory conclusion to the investigations.
- 13 There have been no formal complaints received by the Fostering Service.
- 14 Each Fostering family are also required to have an Annual Fostering Review, which ensures that the placement continues to offer the children in placement the necessary care and support, but also celebrates the foster carer's achievements, the successes in placements over the year, and sets targets for the carers to ensure they continue their professional development.
- 15 The Fostering Service also ensures that support groups are held each month for carers to attend, which allows them access to peer support and information. There are also quarterly consultation sessions, attended by the Operations and Strategic Manager, to ensure that foster carers are consulted and informed about service development issues and they are also given the opportunity to share their views to help to shape future service improvements.
- 16 In terms of recruitment of foster carers, the Fostering Service continues to work innovatively and proactively in a very challenging and competitive marketplace to recruit new carers. The Service has a clear Marketing and Recruitment Strategy created jointly between the Fostering and Adoption Services and designated colleagues in communications and marketing, to ensure that advertising and promotional opportunities are maximised and that the right message about becoming a foster carer is projected to the public.

- 17 Existing foster carers are encouraged to be part of this process and to contribute through offering their views and experiences. A foster carer needs analysis has been completed which provides an up to date plan of the types of carers that the service needs, to ensure that the marketing and recruitment activity targets activity which will yield the best results.
- 18 In addition to marketing, the Recruitment and Assessment Team also hold regular information events for members of the public, at varying times and venues, to ensure the service is as approachable and accessible as possible to prospective new carers. Our commitment to interested carers is to provide a complete, thorough assessment in line with legal requirements and regulations, which ensures that the safety of any child placed, is paramount, and is carried out in a timely manner that makes the process as simple and manageable for prospective carers as it can be.
- 19 In terms of performance targets the Fostering Service aims to have 29 newly approved households. This will equate to 40 placements during 2017-18, which compares to 25 households (2016-17) and 22 households (2015-16).

The Placement Service is beginning to see an improvement in maximising placement opportunities for children who require foster care and alternative provision. A consistent team who have the placement capacity oversight and the improved direct links to foster carers is beginning to demonstrate some early results in relation to reducing the requests for Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements and offers a more quality approach to information shared with carers.

Key Lines of Enquiry: How well does Durham support its foster carers?

- 20 The Fostering Service has been consistently commended by Ofsted for the levels of support provided to foster carers and the service provided to children. Foster Carers state they feel well supported by the Service to meet the needs of children they are caring for who often have challenging and complex needs. This can be considered in the context of the findings of the Fostering Network's State of the Nation Report 2016, in which carers identified the following areas that required improvement:
- a) Improved communication and support
 - b) Being treated more as a professional
 - c) Better financial support
- 21 Levels of communication and support to foster carers is a strength of the service and overall foster carers are happy with this aspect. The Fostering Service has looked to develop and build upon this to provide the best possible service. The Fostering Service website is regularly updated and provides information and items of interest to all carers and their families. The service ensures that all carers, whether mainstream or Family and Friends carers, have an allocated social worker and that they have a direct supervision in their home every month. This ensures regular communication, feedback and

support and their progress is formally reviewed each year. Monthly support groups are facilitated by the service and it is hoped that these can be further developed in the coming year to encourage the support to become more peer focussed and based, so foster carers support other foster carers. The quarterly consultation meeting also provide carers with an opportunity to feedback about the service and also to be involved as a stakeholder in future decisions about the service moving forward and enables them to become involved in service developments

- 22 The Full Circle is an essential service to looked after children and is highly valued by foster carers in the support they provide to looked after children and their foster carers. It also is a key factor in the successful recruitment of new foster carers for Durham.
- 23 Durham Children and Young Peoples Service recognise the integral role foster carers have in young people's lives and their attendance at professional meetings concerning children they are caring for is fully encouraged and supported. Foster carers are given the opportunity to share their views at these meetings as they are the people who know the children well.
- 24 The annual foster carer review is a statutory requirement and is focussed on the carer's professional development to ensure foster carers are encouraged and supported to attend training and to complete a portfolio of evidence to support their own learning, development and progression.
- 25 In relation to financial support, Durham's Fostering Service fully recognises and celebrates foster carers skills with regard to allowances and fees. The service is competitive across the North East region to ensure that foster carers are supported in the task of caring for children. The 'Payment for Skills' approach links the payments carers receive to the assessed level of skill and expertise that they have as a foster carer. This is a fair and equitable approach that ensures that carers are assessed and reviewed in terms of the level of care they provide and paid accordingly. This enables the service to offer a variety of placement types to meet the needs of children which are often very variable and also ensures equity to Family and Friends Foster Carers.

Recommendations:

- 26 The Corporate Parenting Panel is requested to consider the report which is anticipated to provide reassurance that the service continues to ensure effective support to looked after children in foster care, maintain placement stability and reduce the risks of placement breakdowns.
- 27 The Fostering Service Annual Report will be presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel in Summer 2018.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Finance The Fostering Service has a defined budget which is at present under some pressure due to the rising numbers of children being looked after.

Staffing The Fostering Service is now fully staffed and has received additional staffing to ensure the Placements Service was established which ensures the service maximises any placement capacity and directly informs the overall Sufficiency Strategy to ensure we have sufficient carers to meet needs.

Risk N/A

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty N/A

Accommodation The Fostering and Adoption Service has recently relocated to Spectrum 8 in Seaham. This building is of a very high standard and enables teams to be located together. It has also yielded rental savings which is in line with the Councils Accommodation Strategy.

Crime and Disorder N/A

Human Rights All children and young people have the right to experience a family life. This is particularly important for looked after children who by their very nature are more vulnerable and may have experienced disadvantage prior to becoming looked after. The Fostering Service aims to recruit and approve foster carers with a variety of skills and experience to meet their needs.

Consultation Foster Carers are regularly consulted over any changes in the service and are actively invited to be involved in any changes within the service and service improvements.

Procurement– N/A

Disability Issues The Fostering Service must ensure it meets the needs of disabled children and young people within its provision.

Legal Implications The Fostering Service must continue to meet its statutory and legal duties in relation to children's safeguarding and standards of provision to children who are looked after. The Ofsted framework places significant expectations on the service in this regard.