



Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

12 November 2014

Report title	Fostering Recruitment Strategy Report	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Val Gibson	
Wards affected	All	
Accountable director	Sarah Norman, Community	
Originating service	Children Young People and Families	
Accountable employee(s)	Daphne Atkinson	Children Young People and Families Senior Consultant Social Worker
	Tel	01902 553070
	Email	Daphne.atkinson@wolverhampton.gov.uk
Report to be/has been considered by		

Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

The Panel is recommended to:

1. Scrutinise and comment on the Fostering Recruitment Strategy and Marketing Communication Action Plan.

The Panel is asked to note:

1. The Fostering Recruitment process which is outlined within the Fostering Strategy and Marketing and Communication Action Plan

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 This report sets out the actions and strategies which will be employed to increase the provision of internal foster carers for Wolverhampton looked after children.
- 1.2 To inform the panel of plans to recruit and support foster carers for Wolverhampton City Council. The Fostering Recruitment Strategy, attached at appendix A, describes the work the fostering service has carried out and will continue to undertake to increase the number of foster families for looked after children and young people who might otherwise be placed in external provision

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Wolverhampton's sufficiency strategy sets out the plan to deliver improved outcomes for looked after children and achieve value for money in the delivery of placement services. Foster care placements has become a priority both nationally and locally not just as a result of the 'Sufficiency Duty' but also because research shows, that the needs of children and young people ,especially those with challenging behaviours, are best met in family situations.
- 2.2 As a result of the growth in the number of children coming into care, there has been a requirement for an increased number of foster care placements. This has meant that the recruitment of additional carers has been of even greater importance.
- 2.3 Nationally, there is a growing trend in high cost placements which has become increasingly financially challenging for local authorities. In the last financial year 2013/14 care placements, particularly specialist care placements, accounted for a significant proportion of Wolverhampton's Looked After Children budget.

The reasons for this increase relate to the needs of the care population, the costs of securing the right placement to meet individual needs, and external market forces. However, there is potential for Wolverhampton's looked after children population to stabilise and therefore reduce the need for such placements. This is because there are several strategic development taking place, for example, ' families r first'.

- 2.3 Wolverhampton has a varied range of internal care placement resources, but it struggles to provide placements for children aged 12 years and above and for short breaks for disabled children and young people with complex needs. For these reasons, it does have a high use of externally commissioned foster care placements. This balance needs to change. The Fostering Recruitment Strategy and Marketing Action Plan (see appendix A) outlines the measures we will employ to redress this.

3.0 Recruiting and retaining foster carers.

3.1 Recruiting and retaining foster carers is an on-going challenge for fostering services across the country and Wolverhampton City Council is no exception. Research indicates that there is an estimated national shortage of 10,000 foster families (Fostering Network 2013).

The fostering Service has a well-established pool of experienced and committed foster carers. However, Wolverhampton has a large group of carers aged over 55 years of age, equivalent to 25% of the carer population. This compares to the national average of 18%.

3.2 The responsibility for recruitment and assessment of foster carers returned to Wolverhampton's Fostering Service in 2013, following the de-commissioning arrangements with Five Rivers. As a result of good collaborative and partnership working with corporate marketing and communications colleagues and additional investment there is an expectation of achieving longer term savings. The Fostering Service has engaged in a programme of advertising in order to recruit foster cares.

3.3 Whilst the recruitment activity is positive, the retention of foster carers is less positive in 2013/14 than compared to 2012/13. The local authority lost 14 foster households in 2013/14 compared with a loss of seven foster households in 2012/13. The reasons for people ceasing to foster were, choosing to retire (due to reasons of age and/or health) a change in circumstance (relationship breakdown / change in job) or the adoption of a looked after child.

3.4 There is no such thing as a typical foster carer and they come from all sorts of social, racial, cultural and family situations. Whilst a marketing campaign can be targeted to adults within this there is a diverse range of audiences that any campaign would need to reach. Foster carers are mainly recruited through word of mouth and other foster carers. Although there is a view held amongst professionals that this is stimulated by advertisements.

3.5 Our target for recruiting foster carers has now been set at a challenging 40 households including Specialist Foster care. This is an increase of 15 households each year.

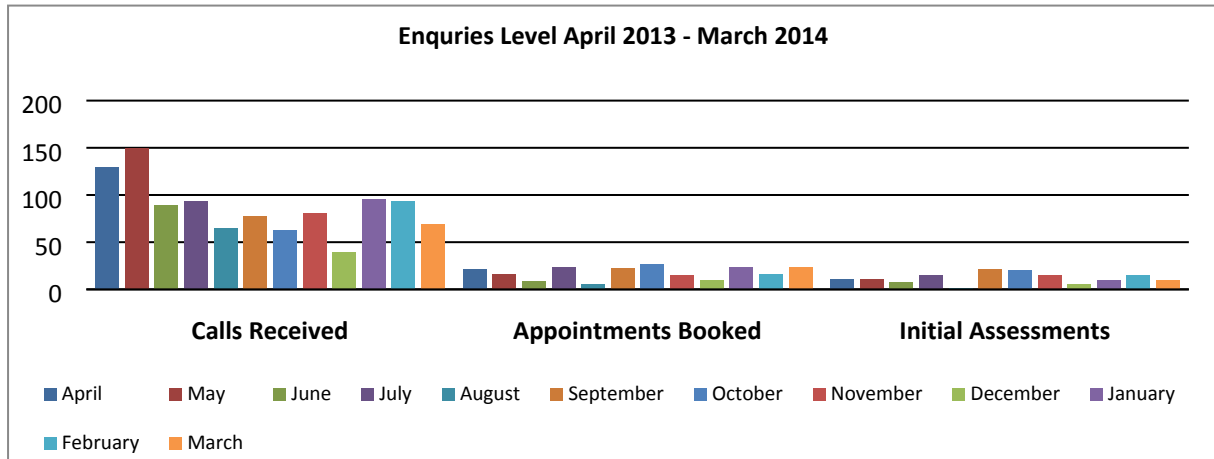
This is based on:

- The number of children requiring foster placements, during the period 2013/14.
- The number of foster carers de-registered during the period 2013/14 and the number of foster placements.
- The plan to recruit foster carers dedicated to providing short breaks fostering, or day placements.
- The plan to recruit specialist foster carers to provide placements for children presenting difficult behaviour, with the aim of reducing the need to place such children with external foster carers, or in residential provision.
- The need to be able to place sibling groups of three and four with in-house foster carers.

3.6 Steps from enquiry to recruitment

City Direct, manages all the initial enquiries relating to fostering for Wolverhampton. The service received a large volume of fostering enquiries and some were then converted into initial assessments.

The table below illustrates the level of enquiry, appointments and initial assessments from April 2013- March 2014.



- 3.7 Whilst marketing can generate the initial enquiries the recruitment process starts from the moment an enquiry is made to the Council. We are grateful for the services of City Direct staff who have managed the high volume of calls received regarding enquiries for fostering in Wolverhampton. Disappointingly, for all concerned, these calls have not translated into the number of visits expected based on the initial numbers of enquiries received with 55% of enquiries dropping out between the enquiry and the initial visit stage. This is clearly an area of concern and might be due in part to customer services officers who have limited background in children services, and might therefore find it difficult to drill down to more specific questions with the caller's interest in wanting to foster, for example, their level of motivation. As a result some enquiries passed on to the Fostering Team have not been appropriate.
- 3.8 The fostering service have implemented a series of training sessions for City Direct staff and will continue to work closely with them to explore how we might better understand the reasons for the drop-out rate. This work will be in addition to providing additional training and regularly sharing of information
- 3.9 We are also currently exploring the use of a new recording resource 'Sharepoint'. Sharepoint is a software platform which will enable us to capture and share better quality information in a timely manner. The support and skills of a foster carer is being used to follow up with a 'soft call' to enquiries when requested to do so by either fostering

workers or City Direct. In the event that these strategies do not prove to be successful, we may need to consider alternative ways of managing this.

4.0 Initial assessment stage

- 4.1 At the initial assessment stage potential foster care applicants would have received more detailed information. In addition, applicants would have an opportunity to talk to existing foster carers and have informal discussions with fostering staff to provide further clarity about the task and criteria.
- 4.2 The service has experienced a higher than usual drop-out rate at this stage. This has in part been due to the issues discussed above, and also the time taken to conduct visits might have meant some people may have lost interest. The new working model will give greater focus and there should be an improvement in the timeliness of assessments. This area of work is subject to monthly monitoring by the Consultant Social Worker responsible for the management and supervision of work. Management information and support Care First business objects processes will support this.
- 4.3 The continuity of social work input from initial contact through to approval will improve response times significantly. The service has seen a reduction in the average length of foster carer assessment process from eight to six and a half months, and the aim is to bring this down further to four and a half months. The full assessment normally takes place over six to eight sessions depending on the size of the household and complexity of the family. The quality assurance process involved in the assessment process should mean that there is a strong likelihood that panel will approve foster carers if a positive assessment is presented.
- 4.4 In July 2013 the Government introduced amendments to the Fostering Services Regulations, 2011. These amendments required fostering agencies to change the way in which prospective foster carers are assessed. This has been a lengthy process with checks, medicals, DBS, and assessments running at different stages. A new assessment model was introduced on 1 January 2014. However, it is still in the process of being imbedded to reflect the requirements of the new regulations.
- 4.5 As a result of this change all available resources are being used to maximise the opportunity of increasing placement choices. For example, the introduction of an expanded approval category to cover the age ranges of 0-18 years. This approach is well utilised throughout the voluntary and independent fostering sector to good effect.
- 4.6 The Fostering Service have worked well with our marketing colleagues and there has been a lot of investment in previous marketing campaigns, which has generated significant level of awareness and interest via enquiries, but didn't translate into tangible conversions. This suggests that marketing needs to be more targeted. Following recent discussions the focus of marketing and advertising will change to be more personalised with an emphasis on the welfare needs of children and messages about fostering. The new approach will stress the difference a positive family life could make to lives of looked after children.

4.7 This change in focus is largely due to the profiling of Wolverhampton foster carers using mosaic. This helps the marketing team to understand our target audience, their behaviours and lifestyle choices in greater detail. The findings revealed that the decision to foster is based on individuals' core values with the main motivating factor being their desire to make a difference and do the right thing. This information will be used to good effect. For examples, images of children featured on the council's website have been changed.

In addition, Marketing Officers, the Fostering Team, and foster families will have regular meetings so that they can evaluate the success of advertising campaigns, which will help inform future planning and service delivery.

4.8 The Fostering Service has been restructured to provide dedicated focus to recruitment and assessment, and a separate unit to provide support for foster carers following panel approval is a positive way forward. There has been a positive response within the foster care population to the changes. This has been evidenced by staff, the fostering panel, and by other colleagues. This is a positive indication for the Fostering Team, which could suggest that the improvements implemented in all areas are becoming assimilated.

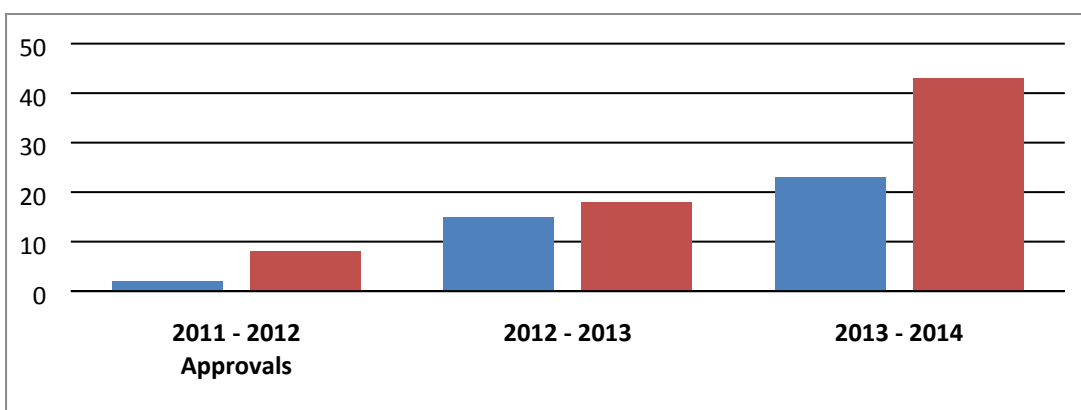
5.0 **New initiative**

5.1 The Fostering Network has selected Wolverhampton City fostering to be one of 11 local authorities to join in an innovative programme to recruit foster carers. This approach will commit Wolverhampton to adopt a new innovative way of recruiting foster carers for the next sixteen months.

6.0 **Activity of approvals as of 31 March 2014**

6.1 Mainstream or Short term foster carers, care for children and young people on a short term basis, until permanent plans are made for them. Therefore children and young people could be in placement for a few days, a few months or two to three years depending on the circumstances of their individual situations.

The table below illustrates the number of foster carer approvals for the last three years



- 6.2 The challenges faced in terms of achieving the target for approval this year amongst other factors, have in part been due to issues out of the service control. For example, Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks were taking an average of three months to be returned. The DBS process and procedures sets out an expectation that checks will be returned within 60 days and it is not possible to chase or follow up enquires until after this time. Similar issues have arisen in respect of Agency Medical Adviser reports which have also been delayed due to an overall increase in workload associated with looked after children. These two issues resulted in a delay of foster care applications.
- 6.3 Following representation to the Looked after Children Health Steering group a decision was made to increase the resource of Consultant Paediatrician to support this area of work. There is now a half time additional Paediatrician in post to deal with fostering and adoption and children cases.
- 6.4 The target is to reduce the number of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's) placements. This is partly to be achieved by preventing further external placements through the use of local placements and to implement exit plans for a cohort of children whose care plans are either return home or permanence away from the birth family. There is currently a Social Work Unit expediting those care plans. Additionally, other options such as permanency placements through long term foster families are being positively progressed through the Children's Teams and the Fostering Team.
- 6.5 Permanency placements are a growth area which needs quite a lot of focus in order to expedite children's permanency plans through permanent fostering. There are currently 110 children with best interest decisions waiting for their plans to be secured. There is a great deal of commitment to delivering a changed approach to long term family finding for children in the care system. A new family finding process has been established through partnership working with the child's social worker, and the placements team, profiles of these children have featured in foster carer's newsletters for foster carers. This is in its early stages, but it is anticipated that, in identifying the children who are waiting for a family to existing foster families, connections and links will be made.
- 6.6 This is quite a lengthy process which mirrors that of the adoption process in securing permanency plans for children. To support the family finding activity for these children, and in particular those children aged 11 years and over, the Fostering Service needs to consider the possibility of the introduction of a new fee to foster carers who are able to make such a commitment. This will be reviewed as part of the general fostering review of fees and charges which is currently being explored. The service has a Fostering Support Worker who works with the child's social workers to finalise these plans, through to the fostering panel so that the children can be matched to appropriate carers.

7.0 Specialist, Remand Foster Care

7.1 The Fostering Service is seeking to expand the current in house provision to include placements that will care for children and young people who are remanded into the care of the Local Authority by the youth justice courts.

The provision would also include children and young people whose assessed needs and or behaviour means that they require higher level intervention or support. In this situation children and young people may either have had several placement breakdowns or be placed in residential or external placement provision. The latter includes expanding the service to include therapeutic services.

7.2 Placements can last between six and eighteen months. The programme will be supported by a multi- agency team which will include clinical and or educational psychologists, therapist, teachers, social workers and support workers. The team, including the foster carers, will be trained in social learning theory and provide a multi-dimensional intervention designed to create change in any domain of the young person's life assessed to be a contributing factor to the risk of social exclusion. These carers would be expected to be willing and able to give up work and care for children with particularly complex and challenging needs be these emotional, behavioural or physical. The possibility of carers being formally salaried will need to be considered in these circumstances. It is estimated that the cost of each Specialist Foster Carer will be approximately £600 per week, resulting in a total cost of £468,000 for the 15 specialist foster carers proposed.

7.3 To manage this area of work there will be a need to establish the Social Work unit which consist of:

- 1 x Consultant Social Worker
- 2 x Social Workers
- 2 x Family Support workers
- 1 x Therapeutic Care Expert/Therapist
- 1 x Teacher/'support teacher
- 1 x Unit Administrator

This resource will be funded particularly from the closure of the current in-house residential units. It is estimated that the cost of the Specialist Support team will be £319,000 per year.

8.0 Short Breaks/ Support Fostering or Day Fostering

8.1 Children using this scheme do not have to become 'Looked After' if the period of care is less than 24 hours, or they may be accessing short breaks, weekend breaks to give families a break. These are likely to be children with disabilities. Most of the carers who will provide this service will also be approved to provide other forms of foster care as well.

9.0 Fostering Network

- 9.1 Wolverhampton has been selected to be included in 'Fostering Futures' programme developed by The Fostering Network and ipower consulting Ltd from November 2014 to 2016. This will involve using different methods such as 'Cultural Values' approach in recruiting foster carers.

10.0 Retention of Foster Carers

- 10.1 The most recent 'Department of Education Recruitment and Retention of carers survey' 2012/13, shows that rather than a national shortage, the problem appears to be local shortages of foster carers in particular parts of the country; where there are particularly difficulties in carers been able to accommodate more than one and siblings groups of children. The survey states that nationally, in the same period there were 7,400 foster carers recruited but 4,800 were lost. Further, nationally 13% of foster carers resign or their approvals are terminated each year. The reasons given for this are varied. For some, it may be due to changes in personal circumstances, retirement due to the age of foster carers who on average are aged 50-55 years. For others resignation is not so amicable. Allegations, or lack of support, a breakdown in relationship with their own or the children's social worker, a lack of placements or not being treated as a professional are some of the reasons given by foster carers who leave.
- 10.1 Wolverhampton fares well in terms of the national picture with an 8.7% attrition rate. The survey noted that although pay is not generally stated as a motivator, Independent Fostering agencies with higher payments tended to have fewer recruitment problems. The current fee structure is being reviewed to ensure that it is 'fit for purpose' and that it rewards foster carers for the job they do. It is likely that fostering fees will increase in line with the job role.

11.0 Financial implications

- 11.1 The approved budget for 2014/15 for Fostering Recruitment is £24,000.
- 11.2 Given the proposed increased marketing activities, it is unlikely that this amount will be sufficient to cover the full cost and therefore, other budgets within the Looked after Children's Service will need to be identified in order to accommodate any increased pressures on this budget.
- 11.3 The review of foster carers fees and allowances will be the subject of a further report.
[NM/03112014/R]

12.0 Legal implications

In 2010 Statutory Guidance on the Children Act 1989 and Children and young Persons Act 2008 placed the 'Sufficiency Duty' upon local authorities to secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the local area.

[RB/05112014/]

13.0 Equalities implications

13.1 We want to have continuous improvements in securing local foster placements for children from all backgrounds including those of ethnic minority communities, and disabled children and their families, to ensure equality of access to services for all Wolverhampton children who are looked after by the local authority.

14.0 Environmental implications

14.1 There are no known environmental implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

15.0 Human resources implications

15.1 The resources within the Fostering service will need to be strengthened especially in relation to the new creation of the Specialist foster carer provision. Social Workers and allied support personnel will need to be appointed.

16.0 Corporate landlord implications

16.1 There are no known corporate landlord implications. arising from the recommendations in this report.

17.0 Schedule of background papers

17.1 None