

**To the Chair and Members of the
SCHOOLS CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL**

FOSTER CARERS UPDATE

Relevant Cabinet Member	Wards Affected	Key Decision
Councillor Eric Tatton Kelly	All	None

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This report provides an update with regard to the recruitment of mainstream foster carers.

EXEMPT INFORMATION

2. Not exempt

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. The Panel is asked to consider the information provided.

BACKGROUND

4. The challenges facing the Council are very significant in terms of reducing the number of children and young people placed with independent agencies (which are comparatively high cost) and increasing the availability of high quality foster placements within the Council's Fostering Service.
5. Whilst a successful marketing campaign can increase the numbers of enquiries, successful recruitment and retention is ultimately dependant upon the ability of the Fostering Service to undertake assessments promptly and professionally, and the ability to appropriately match, support and train foster carers is similarly vital for overall success. To meet this challenge great efforts have been made to improve the overall capability and performance of the Fostering Team so as to enable real progress in recruitment and retention of foster carers. All vacancies have now been appointed to with full-time, substantive staff, and this has enabled the Service to develop and embed much more robust and effective recruitment and assessment procedures. This has reduced the overall time for enquiry to approval from up to 36 weeks to a much more consistent 16 to 18 weeks. Similarly the overall support and training available to foster carers has greatly improved, resulting in a much more professionalised fostering service and, it is anticipated, improved retention of existing foster carers.

6. Presently there are 159 Foster Carers (including carers who only offer respite care) caring for 186 foster children; with an additional nine temporarily approved 'family or friends' foster carers caring for 16 children.

DEVELOPMENTS

7. *Appointment of 0.5 Communications Officer.* A part time Communications Officer post was created to help drive forward marketing and advertising for new foster carers in Doncaster. This post is based within the Communications Team. The role of the post is to increase the number and quality of enquiries received by the Fostering Team.
8. *New Fostering and Adoption Website.* Our experience shows that increasing numbers of enquiries were coming into the team via the website. However, the Council's website limited the range of information available and how this was presented. The service invested in a new standalone website www.fosteringindoncaster.org that could provide comprehensive information about fostering in Doncaster, to encourage enquiries from people who were already informed about fostering. The online enquiry facility has resulted in 97 enquiries being made since the website was launched in March 2012.
9. *Regular Information Events.* In order to provide a greater opportunity for interested people to access information, the Service has run a series of regular information sessions in different locations across the town. In total 27 information events have been held in a variety of locations including children's centres, community centres, hotels and leisure centres. These were all advertised in a range of local newspapers, magazines and publications and some were promoted on local radio. A total of 119 enquiries came from this approach. Information events allow the applicant to fully explore fostering with a member of the team and take away a range of information.
10. *Commissioning of 'Mosaic' Database Tool.* We have commissioned 'Mosaic', a piece of software that uses targeted demographic data to help understand and communicate with certain audiences based on postcode. This will help us to build a greater understanding of the people that are coming forward to foster in Doncaster and help us effectively target specific groups of the public who we can identify are likely to be more receptive to fostering.
11. *Brand Development.* We have continued to develop the 'Fostering in Doncaster' brand so that it has become a recognisable and familiar logo associated with Doncaster Council. This is an important factor when trying to compete with other fostering agencies in the area. The branding continues to be used on all marketing and advertising materials and has been widely seen in local newspapers, publications, events, on our website and in conjunction with a sponsored football match at Doncaster Rovers.

12. *Recruitment Process.* As outlined earlier, the Fostering Service has aimed to speed up the process with regard to assessing and approving foster carer applicants. At initial enquiry we now offer the applicant the option of an initial home visit should they choose this and aim to carry this visit out within one week of contact with the team. An initial visit duty rota has been set up, which ensures that a fostering social worker is always available to carry out these visits within five working days from receiving the enquiry. Before they formally apply, we have introduced a second home visit that requires the applicant to complete all the necessary paperwork for the statutory checks that we have to carry out. This will minimise the delay that were experienced previously, caused by outstanding checks not being returned before assessments were due at the Fostering Panel. On allocation the assessing social worker and Fostering Team Manager now meet and prepare an assessment plan. This plan outlines the needs of the assessment, builds in a mid point review meeting and sets a realistic Fostering Panel date that the social worker is now expected to make. Liquidlogic is shortly introducing a new foster carer recruitment programme, which we will be able to amend internally to fully reflect Doncaster's processes. The introduction of Liquidlogic (the new children's electronic recording system) should help minimise repetition during the recruitment process as it is very process focused. The service now holds a weekly recruitment meeting to ensure that cases are progressed through the process efficiently and in line with proposed timescales. This meeting helps the service remain focused on recruitment and provide customer focused service to all applicants.
13. *Restructure of Fostering Team.* In order to maximise our efforts on recruitment, two social workers in the Fostering Team now lead on training and assessing foster carers. Without a caseload of foster carers to support, these workers aim to produce a minimum of 10 new fostering assessments a year. Further restructuring is planned, which will improve overall management and quality assurance within the Service.
14. *Foster Carer Assessment Capacity.* We have improved our working relationship with Outcomes UK, who we occasionally commission fostering assessments from and continue to allocate assessments to them when needed. However, the service has started to build up a network of experienced independent social workers who we can use when there is not the in-house capacity to carry out assessments. It is anticipated that this pool of carers will eventually mean that we can reduce costs and have greater control and confidence in the quality of the assessment that is presented to Panel.

15. *New Foster carer Allowances.* A new, simplified system of payments for foster carers was introduced in 2012. These allowances provide a consistent approach to payments. Allowances are now competitive with independent fostering agencies and details of the payments have been included in all recruitment advertising. Allowance payments are now embedded within a much improved system ('Liquid Logic/Controc') that now eliminates the possibility of duplicating payments, which was a significant weakness of the previous system.
16. *Consultations with Foster Carers.* In order to understand how our carers feel about the service and fostering for Doncaster, a questionnaire has been utilised, which will be repeated annually. The results of the questionnaire have contributed to improvements in the delivery of services and how we work with our carers. Regular 'Carer Forums' are also held, where news or any proposed changes about the Service can be shared and debated. Our regular support groups also allow for improved communication and consultations with foster carers about the service they receive.
17. *Fostering Charter.* In line with Fostering Network's recommendations, we have produced a foster carers' charter. The charter is a working document that details the two way relationship between Doncaster Council and its foster carers. The charter outlines what types of service and support foster carers can expect from Doncaster and what Doncaster expects from its carers. Many of the points from the questionnaire were incorporated into the charter.
18. *Training programme.* In 2012 all foster carers were expected to attend and complete six courses from our 'Core Skills' programme; a package of training was offered which helped foster carers meet a basic skills level. Prior to 2012, attendance at Foster Carer Training events was generally very poor, and a culture had developed where carers felt attendance was optional. This culture has been rigorously challenged and the response has been very positive. Attendance at core training has averaged 90-100%. In 2013 an increased training programme is being offered to carers with four distinct phases:
 - 'Preparation to Foster Training' (prior to approval);
 - Post approval induction training through our 'Fostering Changes' programme;
 - Core skills training to be completed within the first 12 months post approval; and
 - 'Specialised Fostering Training' - from a wide menu of training opportunities provided by both in-house providers (e.g. CAMHS, education services) and commissioned training from outside providers.Our target is for all existing foster carers to complete their CWDC (Children's Workforce Development Council) Fostering Standards by May 2013, and all new carers to complete within their first 12 months.

19. *Fostering newsletter.* The service re-launched its newsletter and has committed to providing all carers with three editions a year. The newsletter provides an opportunity to communicate with and deliver consistent messages and information to all foster carers.
20. *Calendar of events.* In 2013, all foster carers will receive a calendar that outlines dates, times and venues for all events covering:
- foster carer Support groups;
 - foster carer forums;
 - children who care forums;
 - children's forums;
 - foster carer and children's social events;
 - foster carer recruitment events;
 - support groups;
 - core training events.
- The calendar also contains all key contact numbers for Supervising Social Workers (including mobile telephone numbers), the out-of-hours service and social worker area offices.
21. *Support Groups.* Four monthly support groups are now established and are based in different areas of Doncaster. All foster carers are encouraged to attend and the groups are publicised via the fostering newsletter and promoted by social workers in supervision. Support groups provide the chance to access informal training from speakers and the opportunity to meet and provide support from other foster carers.
22. *Children who foster groups.* To recognise the special role that foster carer's own children play within the fostering household we have established a children who care group. This group provides the opportunity to consult with birth children as well as say thank you by organising activities. This group aims to meet three times a year.
23. *Children's Forums.* A Children's Forum has been launched with an open invitation to all foster children aged 9 and over. It is planned that the group will nominate two representatives, a girl and a boy, who will represent the children in care views at key future events. The aim of these groups is to provide an opportunity for the children and young people to socialise with other children in care, build relationships with the Fostering Service staff, who can then consult with them on how improvements in service delivery can be made for children in our fostering placements.

OUTCOMES

24. All the above changes and improvements over the last year have seen a positive increase in enquiries and subsequent assessments and approvals of new foster carers. To date this calendar year the number of initial enquiries has already increased by 25% (January to December 2011 – 298 enquiries; January to November 2012 – 374 enquiries).
25. To date this calendar year, the number of approvals has already increased by 42% (January to Dec 2011 – 14 new households approved; January to October 2012 – 20 new fostering households).
26. A further 7 new assessments are expected at the Fostering Panel before the end of December 2012, which would see an almost two-fold increase on the number of carers approved over the same period last year.
27. To date for the financial year:
 - the number of enquiries are as follows:
 - 2011/12 – 350 enquiries;
 - 2012/13 – 286 enquiries (i.e. by mid November – 4.5 months still to go);
 - the number of new approvals are as follows:
 - 2011/12 – 13 new fostering households approved;
 - 2012/13 – 17 new fostering households approved (by end October).
28. A further (minimum) 20 new assessments are expected at the Fostering Panel before the end of March 2013, which would result in a 184% increase on numbers approved in the preceding year 2011/12. The recruitment target for 2012/13 was 30 new approvals. Based on the above projections we are confident of exceeding this.

MIGRATION OF CHILDREN FROM EXTERNAL PLACEMENTS TO 'IN-HOUSE' PROVISION

29. We are facing major financial pressures with regards to expenditure on external residential and independent foster care (IFA) placements.
30. Since July 2012 a series of review panels have focused on the care and pathway plans for young people in external residential placements. The first tranche of meetings focused on the high number of young people aged 16 -18 still in external residential placements and considered potential transition pathways, particularly into the new 16+ supported provision available through Doncaster's own 16+ Care, Support and Accommodation Framework.

31. The second series, starting in September 2012, looked at the wider range of placements with a view of ensuring that actions to return children and young people to more appropriate and cost-effective placements were being delivered in a timely manner. This piece of work highlighted several transition routes from external residential placements and the learning from this has been used to influence the design of a Children in Care Placement Review Process. A project is now underway with a Project Board (of Heads of Service) with the oversight of individual project strands in order to ensure they are managed and delivered according to plans and timescales. Each strand has a list of children and young people within the scope. This will change as individual care plans progress and will be reviewed on a fortnightly basis. Individual strands have a Lead Project Owner (a Service Manager), and support Project Owners responsible for ensuring work is completed as required. Focus, initially, will be on delivering plans relating to those young people who have a care plan to transition out of external residential and independent fostering agency placements before 31 March 2013.

OPTIONS CONSIDERED

32. There are no specific options to consider within this report as it provides an opportunity for the Panel to consider the progress that has been made with regard to Fostering Recruitment 2012/13.

IMPACT ON COUNCIL'S KEY OBJECTIVES

33. The impact of the measures set out in this report are as follows:

Priority Theme	Mayor's Priorities for 2011/12	Implications of this Initiative
Creating a strong, connected and inclusive economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drive forward the Doncaster economy • Get the balance of public and private transport right • Promote Doncaster as a tourist destination • Regenerate Doncaster's town centres 	Increasing the supply of foster carers is a vital part of the overall strategy to improve quality of life outcomes (particularly education, health and employment) for children and young people in care. This will contribute to all the Council and Mayor's Priorities
Developing stronger communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage community harmony and cohesion. Treat people as individuals, not by reference to labels and artificial groupings 	
Increasing and improving housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise housing standards 	
Protecting and improving all our children's lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to improve education and skills • Build on a strengthening Children's Service 	

Priority Theme	Mayor's Priorities for 2011/12	Implications of this Initiative
Improving health and support for independent lives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage attitudes of self-reliance, self-improvement and mutual respect within Doncaster communities 	and particularly "protecting and improving all children's lives", and "ensure local people get value for money from Council services".
Tackling crime and anti-social behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce crime and all forms of anti-social behaviour 	
Creating a cleaner and better environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to protect the environment from developers, decay and architectural vandalism 	
Internal Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure local people get value for money from Council services 	

RISKS AND ASSUMPTIONS

34. There are always difficulties in predicting the numbers of children that may need to be cared for by the local authority. This is especially true today, given the economic circumstances that will inevitably place additional pressures on the most vulnerable and fragile families. Additionally there is a political support for local authorities to intervene more quickly and take more children into care.
35. To illustrate this changeability, In November 2010, a piece of work was undertaken that tried to predict numbers of children in care, and corresponding requirements for 'in-house' provision.

Children in Care Targets and Placement Profile					
Placement Type	Number of Children in Care				
	Current (November 2010)	April 2012	April 2013	April 2014	April 2015
Out of Authority Children's Home	20	18	16	13	11
Mother and Baby Placements	2	-	-	-	-
Out of Authority Residential School	10	6	5	5	4
Secure Accommodation (welfare)	5	2	2	1	1
Secure Accommodation (remand)	5	3	2	1	1
Care Home (Care Homes Act 1984)	7	7	7	7	7
NHS placement (medical/nursing)	4	4	4	4	4
IFA Foster Placements	110	113	86	56	39

Children's Homes (in-house)	26	22	18	15	10
Placement with Parents	34	23	17	12	6
Independent living (private and third sector)	27	27	27	27	27
Council Foster Placement	129	147	159	185	192
Family and Friends Foster Carers	36	37	39	39	43
Adoption Placements	20	21	23	26	27
Total Numbers in Care	471	467	444	430	415
Number in family based placements	295	328	307	306	301
% in family based placements	63	71	70	72	73

As can be seen, the numbers of children in care in November 2010 stood at 471, and by April 2013 was predicted to have reduced to 444. However, as at 22 November 2012, the number of children in care stands at 523, a variance of 79, and an increase of 52 since November 2010. However, it is important to acknowledge that nationally the number of children in care has been rising – 3% over the past 12 months, although it is fair to say the rise in numbers of children in care in Doncaster has been particularly marked. However what is encouraging is that the number of children currently placed with in-house (mainstream) foster carers now stands at 167, and as outlined earlier in this report, we have good numbers of foster carers due to be approved in the coming months which should ensure we exceed the April 2013 target, and possibly even get close to the April 2014 target figure.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

36. The primary legislation governing children and young people in care and fostering services is the Children Act 1989. The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 regulate all fostering services, replacing the Fostering Services Regulations 2002, and came into force on 1 April 2011.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

37. The ongoing campaign to recruit more 'in-house' foster carers is key to reducing the number of external placements and the substantial contribution this will make to the task of eliminating the current overspending in the Children and Young People's Service.

CONSULTATION

38. There has been extensive and ongoing consultation with foster carers and children and young people.

39. With regard to the migration of children from external placements, such as Independent Fostering Agencies and residential provision, ongoing consultations will take place with the child's social worker and Independent Reviewing Officer to ensure that the plan has their full support.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

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