



Public report
Cabinet Member

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People
Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)

27 July 2015
10 September 2015

Name of Cabinet Member:
Councillor Ed Ruane

Director Approving Submission of the report:
Executive Director of People

Ward(s) affected: None

Title: Coventry Fostering Service Annual Report 2014 / 15

Is this a key decision? No

Executive Summary:

The purpose of this report is to inform the Cabinet Member about the work undertaken by the Fostering Service between April 2014 and March 2015.

The performance of Coventry Fostering Service is critical to delivery of high quality local placements that can meet the diverse needs of Coventry's looked after children.

The report summarises the activity of the service over the past 12 months. It highlights the challenge of adequately recruiting the number and type of carers who can meet children's needs and the critical requirements of on-going support and supervision of these carers to. The report also considers the role of the senior management Fostering Steering Group and the members Task and Finish group in providing additional scrutiny and input.

Recommendations:

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People is requested to:

1. Accept the Fostering Service Annual Report 2014/15.
2. Approve the updated Statement of Purpose

The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) is requested to note the content of the report and the updated Statement of Purpose and make any recommendations to Cabinet Member as appropriate.

List of Appendices included:
Appendix 1 Statement of Purpose

Other useful background papers:
None

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

Yes in September 2015

Has it been or will it be considered by any other Council Committee, Advisory Panel or other body?

No

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Coventry Fostering Service 2014/15

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 This report considers the activity by the Coventry Fostering Service during the year April 2014 to March 2015. Located within the Family Placement Service, Coventry Fostering Service is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, approval, preparation, training, supervision and support of foster carers.
- 1.2 Coventry City Council is committed to ensuring that, wherever possible, children are supported to live and be brought up within their family and community network. Where this is not possible and children need to become looked after by the authority, this should be in a family setting or in a placement which prepares them for this. As far as is possible, this will be with Coventry City Council approved foster carers.
- 1.3 Foster Care is a highly regulated area of social work practice and there have been a range of regulations and statutory guidance issued by the Department of Education (DfE) The National Minimum Standards also provide the framework within which the service is required to operate. The standards also profile the central importance of the child's relationship with their Foster Carer and the need for Foster Carers to be recognised as core members of the team working with the child. There is a recognition that Foster Carers need to be empowered to take on the day to day tasks of parenting and provide care in the same way as any good parent would do.
- 1.4 The service has been working to an Improvement Plan over the last two years, primarily focused on improving the overall quality of the service, increasing the use of Coventry Foster Carers whilst decreasing reliance on more expensive Independent Fostering Agencies. The service has an additional 27 Foster Carers approved in the last year, but to ensure quality within the service, 17 Foster Carers have either chosen to resign or have been deregistered. The reasons for carers leaving the service are outline in I.15
- 1.5 An Action Plan was implemented along with weekly case tracking meetings which proactively reviewed all activity within the service. All recruitment activities in relation to prospective carers (including initial visits and assessments) were tracked on a weekly basis to ensure that carers were assessed rapidly and to prevent drift. Similar scrutiny was applied to the annual review process for Foster Carers and the management of any allegations against them.
- 1.6 One of the main areas of focus in the Improvement Plan was on the quality of support given by Foster Carers. A comprehensive training programme with a dedicated training officer was implemented. This ensured all carers undertook their Children's Workforce Development Programme qualification which is a regulatory requirement. In turn the standard of care has improved as Foster Carers knowledge, awareness and understanding has increased with improved training.
- 1.7 At the end of March 2015, there were 589 looked after children by the Council. Of these 413 children were placed in Foster Carer of which 134 children were placed with Coventry Foster Carers and 279 children were placed with Foster Carers approved by Independent Fostering Agencies. A further 23 children were placed with family and friends carers and 36 children were placed for adoption.
- 1.8 The Foster carers provide a range of local quality placements for looked after children. The proportion of children looked after by a foster carer approved by Coventry was 22.8% as at of March 31st 2015. This remains largely unchanged from previous 2 years.

- 1.9 Coventry Foster Carers could be from the family or friendship network of the child. There were 17 households where the carers were related historically on March 31st 2015. However in March 2015 the majority of carers' households are not related to the child and are expected to care for children from a wide variety of backgrounds and for different durations.
- 1.10 Of the household providing this type of care as of March 2015 these households offered 236 placements (i.e. 1.6 placements per household). These carers are known as mainstream carers.
- 1.11 Whilst the number of children in placement per household has remained constant at 1.6 the number of foster household approved has increased. Set out below is comparison from previous year which saw a net gain of 10 households

Recruitment, Approval and Resignations of Mainstream Carers

Mainstream carers	2013/14	2014/15
Foster carers at start of year (excluding family and friends)	131	137
New carers recruited	18	27
Carers lost	24	17
Foster carers at year end (excluding family and friends)	137	147 (+ 3 short break households)
Number of Placements	226	236
Recruitment and Assessment of Mainstream Carers	2013/14	2014/15
Number of Initial enquires	224	286
Number of Applications received	64 (5 in progress)	82 (16 in progress)
Number of households approved (excluding family and friends)	18	27
Conversion Rate - Enquiry to Application	26%	23%
Conversion rate Application to Approval	28%	33%

- 1.12 Overall the conversion rate was 10.59% for 2014/15. A 10% or better conversion rate would reflect a well-targeted recruitment campaign that is attracting households that have the capacity and the qualities to become foster carers. It is encouraging that changes to recruitment campaign have fielded an improved conversion rate from application to approval as well as significant increase in the number of households approve.
- 1.13 The Family Placement Service commenced tracking the timeliness of assessments. Although only 48% of assessment met with standards required the later part of the year saw some improvement in the compliance with timescales. This will be a priority for the Service in 2015/16. Timely returns of DBS checks is the key factor contributing to the timeliness of assessments.

1.14 Occupancy Levels – As part of the medium term financial strategy targets have been set and revised for internal fostering (excluding connected persons) over time to increase the number of children placed in-house and to deliver savings. Increasing occupancy levels in utilising foster carer beds remains a key priority. The number of children in placement throughout the 2014/15 financial year was on average 178 children with 145 internal fostering (start year position was 191 – 157 internal fostering). This decrease has meant the service has not met the target increase figures for 2014/15 which have been built into the medium term financial strategy. The table below shows the target and actuals for 2014/15. Numbers are for mainstream fostering placements and based on average bed nights. Forecasts for 2015/16 were based on achievement of the target of 163 by 31 March 2015. This will now have an impact on the 2015/16 position.

Target	By 2014/15
Target set for 2014/15 (set prior 14/15 Financial Year)	180
Revised Target November 2014	163
Actuals (forecast for 2014/15)	145
Shortfall (revised target)	18

1.15 Recruitment activity has led to an increase in foster carer households and places however this has not translated into more children being placed internally for two reasons. These are the matching considerations for older children and placing siblings together.

- The shortfall in house placements that can meet the needs of sibling placements and older children will need to be reflected in recruitment campaigns, the assessment of new carers and the development of support packages.
- Maximise the gains made in the net increase of Fostering Households by reducing the number of carers on hold. At the end of June there were 26 carers which have steadily reduced since March 2015, with a further 7 returning to fostering by the end of August 2015.
- Improvements in the decision making to remove a carer from the vacancy list are urgently required alongside management review.

1.16 Improving in-house occupancy is a critical priority and following recent meetings of the Children’s Operational Management Group and the Fostering Steering group, further work is underway to determine the most realistic increase in numbers for 2015/16 given the current shortfall.

1.17 Part of understanding the occupancy is understanding the type and duration of placements. Below is the outline of the type of placements number of children in each type of in house placement as of 30 March 2015. Encouragingly an additional 23 children are now placed long term with in house carers from 2013/14. However there has been a reduction of 41 children in short term placements.

1.18 An analysis of the children placed in external placements confirmed that this was required to ensure siblings groups stayed together or placements to meet the needs of older

children with complex and challenging behaviours. At the end of March 2015 the children looked after were in the following types of placements.

Types of Placements	2013/14	2014/15
Long term	49	72
Short Term	103	62
Emergency	3	0
Family/ Friends	33	23
Parent and Child	3	0
Short breaks only	8	6

- 1.19 Although there was significant increase in mainstream assessment and subsequent approvals this was affected by 17 resignations, retirements or terminations of approvals. Understanding the reasons for leaving the service, with a managerial review of all decisions is crucial. Below is the analysis in the past 2 years for the reasons.

Reason	2013/14	2014/15
Permanence plan for child	5	1
Connected Persons temporary approval only	0	2
Move to another agency	0	0
Retirement, change of circumstances, health, space	10	9
Safeguarding (Termination)	2	2
Resigned prior to Safeguarding issues	1	1
Other – including death	0	2
Total	18	17

- 1.20 Feedback from both current foster carers and from exit interviews undertaken by the Team Managers has highlighted importance of high quality and consistent support from the both children's social worker and supervising social worker. This is fundamental to improving the retention, as well as maintaining the good will and flexibility of Foster Carers.
- 1.21 In March 2015 at the Annual Fostering Conference departmental managers acknowledged the significant short falls in the current approach to engaging and involving Foster Carers in the core tasks of care planning by the supervising social worker and children's social worker. The conference noted that this had led to foster carers feeling isolated, not valued and with their expertise with and knowledge of the child not being recognised or used. A follow up consultation exercise undertaken to inform what will be a refreshed fostering support strategy for 2015 – 2017 has now been completed.

- 1.22 As a result of these shortfalls a Team around the Child approach has been adopted by the Service. This requires foster carers to be involved in all stages of the care plan development and delivery. With the launch of Delegated Authority in June 2015 foster carers are now able to take more day to day responsibility for the care of the child and subsequently this will mean a great sense of security for the child i.e the person looking after them is also the same person who can make many key decisions.
- 1.23 The KEEP programme intervention has continued to be offered to both foster carers and Guardians. It has now become part of the mandatory training for carers who are approved to take children within the age of 4 to 11. In 2014/15 9 carers completed the course. Results continue to show that carers value the 16 week programme and report improved behaviours for specific children.
- 1.24 The completion of Foundation training in Theraplay by 7 staff in the Family Placement Service has meant the delivery of monthly workshops to Foster carers on effectively using these principles whilst working with children. Feedback from the monthly workshops which involve the child has been that this relationship based intervention is meeting the needs of carers who are working with children who have a number of attachment related behaviours.
- 1.25 **Oversight and Challenge** – In light of the challenge of recruitment and retention of foster carers, a Members’ led Task and Finish group was established in 2014 to provide further scrutiny of the Service plans and the relationship with the foster carers and the Association. A senior manager Steering Group continued to meet to provide problem solving forum to ensure the accelerated improvements required are delivered on time. Both interventions have provided the critical oversight the agency has required and the input to address what had been long standing problems in data management and sustaining a customer service focus.
- 1.26 **Fostering Panel** – Improvements have been made to the Fostering Panel to make sure it worked in an efficient and effective way. Monitoring sheets are completed for each case presented at panel and the panel provides feedback to the Agency Decision Maker. The Panel makes recommendations to the Fostering Service and these recommendations are referred to the Agency Decision Maker for a decision as to whether a Foster Carer should be approved. The Fostering Panel meets on a monthly basis and it feeds back any issues or concerns to the Registered Manager.
- 1.27 Sarah Borthwick continues to act as the independent chair of the Fostering Panel. The Panel met a total of 13 occasions and was quorate on each occasion. The Panel has continued to provide the service detailed feedback on the quality of the work discussed and has noted continued improvements in the assessments and foster carer reviews. Panel has however been concerned with the quality of social work practice as reported from foster carers and asked the Service Manager to consider prioritising improving relations with the children’s social workers. Panel training in allegation management is scheduled for July 2015 and the completion of appraisals for both the Chair and members will be prioritised in 2015.
- 1.28 The appointment of Recruitment and Development officer in November 2014 has sharply focused the recruitment campaigns over the last six months. Coventry now has a strong marketing strategy and brand which includes both fostering and adoption. It utilises current research undertaken by Fostering Network and the Department of Education to incorporate value modes with in the key messages inherent to the campaigns - “Childhood Memories” and “Alfie’s journey”.

1.29 There is on-going activity to strengthen relationships with business partners, faith and community groups. This includes

- Coventry Sports Foundation (securing free use of venue for recruitment, training and events with foster carers.)
- Coventry Railway Station and Virgin Trains (monthly activity on first Friday of each month)
- Herbert Art Gallery (exhibition and event space provided free of charge and desk for enquiries)
- Chamber of Commerce (presentations and networking opportunities)
- Positive Images Festival
- Free Radio and Hillz FM.
- Imagination Café
- Faith and Community groups

1.24 Coventry now has a strong social media presence established with interactions from media and existing carers. Recruitment activity has included extensive use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Our online content on the website is regularly updated and feedback about the website has significantly improved. The launch of the 'Alfie's Journey' film has further increased the reach and awareness in the City. The impact of the campaigns and the various activities used to deliver it is currently being fully evaluated with a report due to the Lead Cabinet member by 2nd September 2015. Meanwhile activity and impact may be partly measured by the following.

- 76K impressions on Twitter
- 23K views of 'Alfie's Journey' over different online platforms
- 15K Leaflets delivered (based on Mosaic analysis)
- 1321 Likes on our Facebook Page
- 149 Followers on Twitter
- 14 information sessions held (approx. 50 attendees)
- 4 Interviews on Hillz FM
- 3 festivals attended (Godiva, Positive Images, Hillfields)
- 3 Interviews on BBC CWR (two with foster carers)
- 2 Free Radio Storycorners held
- 2 articles in Citivision
- 1 children's storytime event targeting BME communities
- 1 Exhibition online and at Herbert Art Gallery in June 2015

1.25 The Recruitment and Development officer supports developments in the Service with regard to an effective communication and retention strategy, providing strong challenge. This has resulted in a refreshed FCA committee and clear plan to support engagement with a wider group of carers .This includes;

- Monthly Foster Carers Newsletter established providing up to date and relevant information.
- Facilitated capacity building with the Coventry Foster Carers Association
- Online Survey for the FCA foster carers needs from a foster carers organisation
- Led on the consultation for the fees and allowances (online, facilitated events and phone surgeries) completed and implemented
- Support to foster carers looking to set up localised support groups and activities
- Engaged foster carers in recruitment (advertorials on Free Radio, interviews, website and social media content and attendance at information events)
- Media Liaison Officer recruited from FCA – soon to run a media session for interested carers and staff

1.26 The priorities for recruitment going forward are to secure foster carers for sibling groups and older children including teenagers with a distinct campaign being launched from September 2015. This is going to be driven by engaging:

- Face to face engagement with faith groups
- Family friendly events engaging communities
- Continue to have a strong presence on digital and audio media
- Engaging business partners with Fostering Champion

2 Options considered and recommended proposal

That the Fostering Report is noted and the updated Statement of Purpose accepted.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

3.1 Not applicable

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

4.1 Not applicable

5. Comments from Executive Director, Resources

5.1 Financial implications

5.1.1 In-House Fostering fees – Outturn 2014/15

The actual spend for mainstream and connected persons for 2014/15 was £3,308k against a budget of £3,801k, giving an overall underspend of £493k. As highlighted in section 1.12 above, the actual placement numbers for in-house fostering of 145 (based on average bed nights) were much lower than the original target of 180, which was used for budget setting.

It should be noted that the reduced numbers contributed to the overall placements overspend of £1.9m where as a direct consequence more expensive external fostering numbers were much higher than target.

Numbers have continued to fall in 2015/16 and the Head of Service has been tasked with providing a realistic target for this year onwards.

5.1.2 The KEEP programme gross expenditure for 2014/15 was £44k, largely supported by grant. Although the grant was withdrawn at the end of 2014/15, this service will continue to be funded through core budget.

5.2 Legal implications

No legal implications.

6. Other implications

Any other specific implications

6.1 How will this contribute to achievement of the Council's key objectives / corporate priorities (corporate plan/scorecard) / organisational blueprint / Local Area Agreement (or Coventry Sustainable Community Strategy)?

The Family Placement Service contributes to the wellbeing of children through arranging for a fostering, adoption and other permanent placement for a child whose own family is unable to provide care. It supports a key element of Corporate Parenting – that of securing appropriate family placements for 'Looked After Children' (LAC), as an effective means of giving them the best life chances possible.

6.2 How is risk being managed?

This risk is being managed through the Fostering Steering Group and Children's Operational Management Group and both groups provide robust challenge to the delivery against the targets set for the service, in examining the increase in foster carer households and occupancy of approved beds.

6.3 What is the impact on the organisation?

Increasing the numbers of internal foster carers and children placed internally will reduce the need for more costly external placements..

6.4 Equalities / EIA

An Equality Impact Needs Assessment was undertaken as part of the Fundamental Service Review in 2012.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) the environment

None

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None

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