

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Name of Cabinet Member: Councillor Ed Ruane

Director Approving Submission of the report: Director of Children Services

Ward(s) affected: None

Title: Coventry Fostering Service Annual Report 2015/16

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 2015 and March 2016.

The performance of Coventry Fostering Service is critical to delivery of high quality local placement 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 requirement for on-going support and supervision of these carers. 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:

1. The Fostering Service Annual Report 2015/16 is accepted.
2. The updated statement of Purpose is approved

List of Appendices included:

Appendix 1 Statement of Purpose

Other useful background papers:

None

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

No

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 2015/16

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 This report considers the activity by the Coventry Fostering Service during the year April 2015 to March 2016. 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 approved foster carers.
- 1.3 Foster Care is a 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 for Fostering (last updated in 2011) 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, primarily focused on improving the overall quality of the service, increasing the capacity of Coventry Foster Carers whilst decreasing reliance on more expensive Independent Fostering Agencies.
- 1.5 At the end of March 2015 there were 147 approved mainstream households and in March 2016 these increased to 148 approved households. The service recruited an additional 20 Foster Carers approved but this gain was offset by a loss of 19 fostering mainstream households who were either deregistered or chose to resign. A further 5 connected persons fostering households were deregistered as carers secured special guardianship orders or the children they were caring for became adults.
- 1.6 The number of children placed internally increased from 137 at the 30/04/15 to 149 at the 31/03/16 (utilising 61.6% of the approved capacity). The original target was to secure 175 households and to have 180 children placed internally by the end of 2015/16. Due to a fall in numbers of children placed internally in 2014/15, this was reviewed, and an action plan for in-house placements, was put in place to ensure the service still met target by focusing on occupancy as well as recruitment; reducing places that were on hold or vacant, as well as increasing Foster Carer placements by 19. This target was not achieved, but the service managed to increase numbers to retain their 14/15 baseline position of approximately 150.
- 1.7 In order to strengthen Coventry's position to drive the recruitment of foster carers and to compete with other providers, Coventry introduced a skills fee per child and allowances in line with those recommended by the National Fostering Network in 2015 and these were agreed and implemented in consultation with foster carers and the Coventry Foster Carers Association
- 1.8 The Council also introduced a Fostering Friendly Employer policy which was approved in July 2015 by Cabinet Member for Strategic Finance and Resources and launched across the Council in September 2015.
- 1.9 At the end of March 2016, there were 585 looked after children.

Of the 585 children 431 children were placed in foster care.

Of the 431 children 149 children were placed with Coventry foster carers compared with 134 in 2014/15. This equates to 35% were placed with internal foster carers.

Of the 431 children 257 children were placed with Independent fostering agencies and this is a reduction compared with the 279 children in 2014/15.

Of the total number of children looked after 26% are placed with Coventry foster carers. This is an improvement since March 2015 when only 22.8% were placed internally

At the end of March 2016, a further 22 children were placed with family and friends carers.

1.10 Coventry Foster Carers could be from the family or friendship network of the child. There were 17 households where the carers were related. 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. Of the household foster care as of March 2016 these households offered 242 placements (i.e. 1.6 placements per household). These carers are known as mainstream carers. Whilst the number of children in placement per household has remained constant at 1.6 the number of foster household approved has increased slightly.

Recruitment, Approval and Resignations of Mainstream Carers

Mainstream carers	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Approved households	137	147	148
New carers recruited	18	27	20
Carers lost	24	17	19
Number of available Placements	226	250	242
Placements utilised as at the 31/3		137 (54.8%)	149 (61.6%)
Recruitment/Assessment Mainstream Carers	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Number of Initial enquires	224	290	312
Assessments started at stage 1	64	69	112
Assessments commencing to stage 2	NK	22	39
Number of households approved (excluding family and friends)	18	27	20
Conversion Rate - Enquiry to Application (assessments started)	29%	24%	36%
Conversion rate Application (assessments started) to Approval	28%	39%	18%

1.11 Overall in 2015/16 the conversion rate from enquiry to approval was 6.4%, which is a reduction from 2014/15 at 9.3%. Generally we would look for a 10% or better conversion rate, which would reflect a targeted recruitment campaign that is attracting households that have the capacity and the qualities to become foster carers, and then a sound assessment process to turn

these into households approved. A targeted recruitment campaign (from December 2015) and changes to the application and approval process have been put in place to address this reduction, and yield better results moving forward.

- 1.11 The timeliness of assessments has been poor with only 6 of the 20 assessments being completed in the statutory timescales. One of the contributors to delays in the meeting statutory timescales are the medical reports and the timeliness of DBS checks. Robust monitoring and case tracking meetings which proactively review all activity within the service have been established.
- 1.12 In March 2016 a small recruitment team was established which includes 1 fte social worker and 2 recruitment officers (G5) and this is located within the Assessment team. It fast tracks fostering enquiries, offers and undertakes initial visits within 72 hours and supports all recruitment activity. The end to end process for managing the carer journey has been re-engineered so as to produce a much more timely response to enquiries.
- 1.13 All recruitment activities in relation to prospective carers (including initial visits and assessments) are tracked on a weekly basis to ensure that carers were assessed rapidly and to prevent drift. In addition, the performance of the service is supported by a comprehensive performance score card which is reviewed monthly.
- 1.14 Preparation and training groups have been held for all prospective foster carers who have already had an initial visit from a recruitment social worker within the fostering team. The training, which is delivered by the fostering team and involves foster carers as well as looked after young people or care leavers. The training materials have been updated in line with the revised "Skills to Foster" training pack.
- 1.15 One of the main areas of focus for the service has been is to improve the quality of support given to Foster Carers. A comprehensive training programme is in place and ensures all carers undertake their Induction Training, Support and Development Standards 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. Carers requested crèche facilities be made available and these are now in place for some courses.
- 1.16 The appointment of the Recruitment and Development Officer for fostering and adoption has created capacity in the service to drive the recruitment of foster carers. The Recruitment and Development officer has sharply focused the recruitment campaigns. These have been more evident since November 2015. There has been strong leadership from the Director and Members, in particular Councillors Ruane and Ken Taylor in driving the visibility of the marketing campaigns.
- 1.17 Coventry 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 within the key messages inherent to the campaigns - "Childhood Memories" and "Alfie's journey". There is on-going activity to strengthen relationships with business partners, faith and community groups. This includes
 - Coventry Sports Foundation
 - Coventry Railway Station and Virgin Trains
 - The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum
 - Chamber of Commerce
 - Positive Images Festival
 - Free Radio and Hillz FM.
 - Imagination Café
 - Faith and Community groups
 - Warwick University
 - Coventry University

- 1.18 Coventry 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.
- 1.19 The launch of the 'Alfie's Journey' film has further increased the reach and awareness in the City. The film has won an International Film Award.
- 1.20 Activity and impact in 2015/16 can be measured by the following.
- 76K impressions on Twitter
 - 44K circa views of 'Alfie's Journey' over different online platforms
 - 1822 Likes on our Facebook Page (from 1054 in April 2015)
 - 257 Followers on Twitter
 - 20 information sessions will be held by end of March 2016.
 - 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
 - 3 articles in Citivision
 - 3 children's storytime event targeting BME communities by end March 2016
 - One exhibition online and at Herbert Art Gallery in June 2015
 - Warwick Arts Centre showing 'Alfie's journey' on big screens
 - Christmas Light Switch showed 'Alfie's Journey'
- 1.21 The Recruitment and Development Officer supports developments in the Service with regard to an effective communication and retention strategy, providing strong challenge. This includes;
- Monthly Foster Carers Newsletter established providing up to date and relevant information.
 - Dedicated page for the FCA included in the newsletter each month
 - A closed group Facebook page set up Coventry Foster Carers' Association set up and now fully operational
 - 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
 - +
 - Organised a tax and benefits session for carers and produced a guide for all carers
 - Supporting foster carers to set up a weekly foster carers meet up (now running)
 - Engaged foster carers in recruitment (advertorials on Free Radio, interviews, website and social media content and attendance at information events)
 - Developing an evidenced based approach to advice and support for fostering families in regard to the impact of fostering on sons and daughters of foster carers
- 1.22 The Coventry Foster Care Association is a strong and enabling partner in driving improvements in the service and over the last year there have been jointly agreed areas for service development. The Association has been involved in the recruitment of key posts and are involved in a range of recruitment and support activities. They have regularly attended service meetings. Their support in the recruitment and marketing activity has been outstanding.
- 1.23 The Association has grown and has reviewed its membership and officer roles. The Foster Carers' Association have re-elected a full management committee and have clear work plan focusing on:
- Representing foster carers' views
 - Raise awareness and celebrate the role of foster carers
 - Provide peer support and social opportunities for foster carers and children.

Service Improvements.

- 1.24 Events where the service and Council acknowledges the valuable work our foster carers do in meeting the needs of looked after children have been held during 2015/16 and this has included an annual summer event, seasonal celebrations as well as an annual award ceremony with buffet. Elected members, senior management and staff from the fostering, adoption and social work teams attend this important celebration. The award ceremony presents individual awards for achievement and loyal service to Coventry's foster carers.
- 1.25 A monthly welcome event hosted by the Lord Mayor has been established to thank those applicants who have come forward and been approved to become Coventry Foster Carers. This event also allows these newly approved foster carers to meet members of the team they have joined including the Placements Team, Fostering management and the Foster Carer Association.
- 1.26 **Out of Hours Telephone Support Service;** The out of hours telephone support service for foster carers is available for foster carers and is operated by fostering team staff and runs 365 days per year.
- 1.27 **Occupancy Levels** – a key priority is to increase occupancy levels in utilising foster carer beds. The number of children in internal placement throughout 2015/16 was an average of 139 children. Based on the number of children at the end of April 15 and the end of March 16 occupancy levels had improved. See table above in 1.10 for occupancy percentages.
- 1.28 Recruitment and assessment activity in 2015/16 has not led to the anticipated increase in foster carer households. There has however been some gains in more children being placed internally. The matching considerations for older children and placing siblings together is a factor that has meant the children cannot always be placed where foster carers have capacity.
- The shortfall in in house placements that can meet the needs of sibling placements and older children has been reflected in the targeted recruitment campaigns, the assessment of new carers and the development of support packages.
 - There has been targeted work undertaken to maximise the gains made in the net increase of Fostering Households by reducing the number of carers on hold. Over the last year these have reduced to 11.5% of foster carers on hold compared with 20.9% of fostering households in 2015. 9 carers on hold returned to fostering and a number were deregistered or resigned.
 - Improvements in the decision making to remove a carer from the vacancy list have been addressed and this is reflected in the number of carers who have either resigned or have been deregistered.
- 1.29 Improving in-house occupancy is a critical priority and has been the focus of the Fostering Steering group, further work was completed to determine the most realistic increase in numbers for 2015/16.
- 1.30 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. Approval categories for foster carers are wider now enabling more flexibility in placing children as their needs arise.

1.31 The carers lost to the service equates to 25 and 5 of these are connected persons, All carers are offered and exit interview with a manager in the service and their feedback has been used to improve service outcomes. 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	2015/16
Permanence plan for child	5	1	2
Connected Persons - temporary approval or young person now 18	/	2	3 2
Move to another agency as moved 30 miles away from Coventry	/	/	1
Personal circumstances e.g. separation, bereavement, retirement and moved more than 30 miles outside the City	10	9	12
Dissatisfied with quality of service	/	/	1
Safeguarding (Termination)	2	2	/
Resigned prior to quality of care and safeguarding issues	1	1	4
Other – including death	/	2	/
Total	18	17	25

1.31 Feedback from foster carers leaving the service is welcomed and carers are offered exit interviews undertaken by the Team Managers. Feedback from carers on the quality and consistent support from the both children’s social worker and supervising social worker has also been sought and this is fundamental to improving the retention, as well as maintaining the good will and flexibility of Foster Carers. Further work is planned in 2016 to work with children’s teams to embed a more effective team around the child and improve placement stability for our children.

1.32 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 was undertaken to inform what will be a refreshed fostering support strategy for 2015 – 2017. This work has now been completed.

1.33 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. During the last year a number of joint training events and co-production workshops with foster carers and children’s social workers have been held to strengthen relationships and support to carers. The culture of “team around the child” continues to be embedded and requires robust challenge and drive from supervising social workers and fostering managers.

- 1.34 In June 2015, the launch of Delegated Authority has enabled foster carers to take more day to day responsibility for the care of the child and subsequently this will mean a greater sense of security for the child i.e. the person looking after them is also the same person who can make many key decisions. This will be further supported by the development of the Support Strategy which was developed jointly with the Foster Carers Association, the Family Placement Service and Children's team.
- 1.35 The KEEP programme intervention has continued to be offered to both foster carers and Special Guardians. In 2015/16 13 carers completed the course. Results continue to show that carers value the 16 week programme and report improved behaviours for specific children.
- 1.36 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.
- 1.37 **Oversight and Challenge** – In light of the challenge of recruitment and retention of foster carers, 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. Its report was accepted in April 2015 by the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People. Most of the recommendations arising from the report have been considered and implemented, The Fostering Steering Group has 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.
- 1.38 **Fostering Panel** - Improvement has 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 fortnightly basis and it feeds back any issues or concerns to the Registered Manager.
- 1.39 Sarah Borthwick was the independent chair of the Fostering Panel but offered her resignation in 2016. The Panel met a total of 18 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 took place in July 2015 and this involved all staff and managers of the service.
- 1.40 **National Developments:** In 2015 The Government stated their intent to develop Regional Adoption Agencies to ensure that adoption services are delivered on a greater scale, and with more innovative approaches to practice and as such have real potential to improve outcomes for children. In December 2015, Coventry in partnership with Warwickshire, Solihull, After Adoption and Barnardos West Midlands secured approval to establish a regional adoption agency. In September 2016 Worcestershire joined the partnership. It also includes Coventry University as a key stakeholder. The partnership is named Adoption Central England (ACE).
- 1.41 To undertake this work a Regional Adoption Board was established in December 2015. The establishment of Adoption Central England (ACE) will have an impact on the Family Placement Service which currently operates as an integrated fostering and adoption service.

The service will need to separate its functions and establish a distinct Fostering Service and Adoption Service. This work will progress in 2016 and the first step towards achieving this will be the appointment of managers for Fostering and Adoption Services.

1.42 The priorities for service going forward are:

1. Disaggregate the fostering and adoption services and manage the change smoothly.
2. Secure foster carers for sibling groups and older children including teenagers.
3. Maintain an aggressive and robust focus on marketing, recruitment and assessment of foster carers.
4. Maximise the capacity of internal foster carers and increase the children placed in internally.
5. Review and strengthen the training and development offer to foster carers
6. Continue to work with children's teams to embed the Team around the Child with a focus on Placement stability .
7. Implement the Foster Carers Support Strategy

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

	<u>2015/16 Budget</u>	<u>2015/16 Outturn</u>	<u>2015/16 Variance</u>
	£000	£000	£000
Internal Fostering	5,100	3,733	(1,367)
External Fostering	9,615	10,255	640
Residential	10,380	11,987	1,607
Total Placements	25,095	25,975	880

The above table shows the 2015/16 outturn position. The unachieved increase in internal foster care placements discussed in paragraph 1.6 accounts for approximately half of the overspend in this area. This includes the budget and cost for residential placements also, as for budgetary control purposes we monitor the placements budget as a whole.

5.2 **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

Report author(s):

Name and job title

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Both of these authors have now left Coventry City Council so the report is presented by:-

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Councillor E Ruane	Cabinet Member for Children and Young People		3/1/17	3/1/17

Appendices

Statement of Purpose – Coventry Fostering Service