

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

16 January 2020

Name of Cabinet Member: Councillor Pat Seaman.

Director Approving Submission of the report:
Deputy Chief Executive (People)

Ward(s) affected: None

Title: Coventry Fostering Service Annual Report 2018/19

Is this a key decision? No

Executive Summary:

The purpose of this report is to inform the Cabinet Member of the work undertaken by the Fostering Service between April 2018 and March 2019.

The performance of Coventry Fostering Service is critical to the 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 and retaining the number and type of carers who can meet vulnerable children's needs. It also emphasises the challenge of developing, supervising and supporting approved foster carers to meet the often-complex range of needs that looked after children have.

This report identifies the growth in the number of children placed in the internal foster care estate resulting in a decrease in external placements. The report outlines an increase in connected persons fostering arrangements and details the ongoing work of the Fostering Transformation Project.

Recommendations:

The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People is requested to accept the Fostering Service Annual report for 2018/19.

List of Appendices included:

none

Background papers:

None.

Has it been or will it be considered by Scrutiny?

The Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) considered progress 'Towards an Outstanding Fostering Service' on 21 June 2018.

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

Yes – Corporate Parenting Board.

Will this report go to Council?

No.

Report title: Coventry Fostering Service Annual Report 2018/19

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 This report considers the activity undertaken by the Coventry Fostering Service during the year April 2018 to March 2019.
- 1.2 Coventry City Council is committed to making sure that, wherever possible, children are supported to live with their birth parents. Where this has not been possible, and children become looked after following an assessment and planning, it is preferable that they are placed within a family setting.
- 1.3 Foster care is subject to legislative and regulatory guidance through, The Children Act 1989, The Fostering Regulations 2011 and the Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011. It is further regulated through the Care Planning, Placement and Case Regulations 2010 and the Children and Social Work Act 2017. The Children and Social Work Act sets out improvements to support for looked after children and care leavers, promoting the welfare and safeguarding of children, and making provision regarding the regulation of social workers.
- 1.4 In February 2018, the Department for Education published a national stocktake of fostering, the stocktake was based on a comprehensive review of fostering and made a number recommendations. Since that publication, the government's response is reflected in 'Fostering Better Outcomes' July 2018.
- 1.5 Fostering Better Outcomes has 36 recommendations which range from better support to foster carers through several approaches, for example stronger delegated authority, seed funding for commissioning and consortia arrangements, and the provision and management of contact for children. The recommendations are being considered by the service as it continues to develop.
- 1.6 Fostering placements are approved as either mainstream or connected persons. Mainstream refers to a range of households who apply to become foster carers for children not known to them. Mainstream foster carers include those offering both long- and short-term care and those who provide respite care. They can care for between 1 and 3 children at a time and for children from 0 to 18 years old. Connected persons fostering refers to those households who offer to provide specific care to a child known to them, usually a relative.
- 1.7 During the past 12 months the Fostering Service has grown from 4 to 5 teams with the creation of an additional team to assess Connected Persons Foster Carers and Special Guardians and the supervision of Connected Persons Foster Carers and the support of Special Guardians. The Service also comprises 1 team which recruits and assesses mainstream foster carers supported by the Fostering Recruitment and Development Officer and 2 teams who are responsible for the supervision of Mainstream Foster Carers. This is overlaid by the work of the Fostering Panel and Fostering Panel Advisor.
- 1.8 In April 2016, the Fostering Transformation Project was launched. The initial aim of the project was to improve the outcomes for looked after children by increasing the number of looked after children placed in internal mainstream placements from a baseline of 149 of internal placements to 250 by April 2018. Following a refresh in 2018 a new target was agreed to increase the number of internal placements to 260 placements by 1 April 2019. This was a significant stretch target for the service. This target was not achieved in April but had been achieved by October 2019. Further stretch targets have been set for 2019/20 and 2020/21.

- 1.9 The aim of the Fostering Transformation Project is both to enable more looked after children to be placed within or close to Coventry and to decrease the reliance on more expensive, externally commissioned, placements.
- 1.10 At the end of 2018/19, 232 of Coventry's looked after children were placed with mainstream foster carers approved by Coventry City Council. This was a growth in the provision of these placements through the year with the total at the end of the previous year having been 189. The proportion of Coventry children placed with externally commissioned carers also fell during the year from 219 to 178.
- 1.11 There was a decrease in the number and proportion of places that were unavailable, reducing from 11.5% (33) at end of 2017/18, to 5.9% (20) at the end of 2018/19.
- 1.12 The total number of active households at year-end stood at 184 with a total of 339 places, showing also that the capacity of existing carers was increased during the year.
- 1.13 There was also growth in the number of Coventry Children placed with Connected Persons Foster Carers. On 31/3/19 there were 92 children placed in these arrangements as compared to 69 on 31/3/18.
- 1.14 This increase in mainstream placements resulted in the proportion of looked after children placed in mainstream fostering placements approved by Coventry City Council growing from 29% to 32%. This is a continuation of the trend with these proportions 27.9% at the end of 2016/17, 25.2% at the end of 2015/16 and 22.8% at the end of 2014/15. For the first time in many years this proportion was higher than the number placed with externally commissioned placements which stood at 25% as of 31/3/19.
- 1.15 At the end of March 2019, there were 703 looked after children.
- Of the 703 children, 497 children were placed in foster care.
 - Of the 703, children 318 children were placed with Coventry foster carers (mainstream and Connected Persons) compared with 254 at the end of March 2018. This includes both mainstream and connected person placements and equates to 63.89% of those children in foster care.
- 1.16 Coventry's mainstream foster carers provide an average of 1.8 placements per household. The total number of approved placements on 31 March 2019 was 339.

Recruitment, Approval and Resignations of Mainstream Carers

Mainstream carers	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Approved households	153	148	152	170	184
New carers recruited	27	20	25	31 Households (Note – 5 households were awaiting ratification of approval)	45 Foster Carers approved in 27 households (excluding Connected Carers)
Carers de-registered	17	20	21	15 Households De-registered	15 Households De-registered
Number of available Placements	250	242	274	287	339
Placements utilised	149 (61.6%)	150 (59.3%)	189 (69%)	197 (68.6%)	232 (68.4%)
Recruitment/ Assessment Mainstream Carers	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Number of Initial enquires	290	312	387	703	815
Assessments started at stage 1	69	112	186	143	151
Assessments commencing to stage 2	22	39	66	61	58
Number of households approved (excluding connected persons)	27	20	25	31	33
Conversion Rate - Enquiry to full assessment	8%	13%	17%	9%	4.4%
Conversion rate enquiry to Approval	11%	6%	6%	4%	1.2%

1.17 There continues to be a significant growth in the number of enquiries to become a foster carer. The numbers received in 2018/2019 were 815 which represents an increase of 112. The Coventry fostering service has established a clear brand and good reputation in the fostering recruitment market which has supported our ability to successfully generate enquiries.

1.18 During 2018/19 the conversion rate from enquiries to assessment continued to drop. This is due to the simplification of the enquiry process meaning that people get in touch with the Fostering Service at an earlier point in their decision-making process to become a foster carer.

However, the Service is committed to reviewing conversion rates and drop outs from assessment on a regular basis during the next 12 months.

- 1.19 Nationally around 10% of mainstream fostering households cease fostering in each 12-month period. In Coventry, 15 households were de-registered which equates to 8%. This indicates that Coventry is better than average at retaining its foster carers.
- 1.20 33 Households were newly approved as mainstream foster carers in 2018/19. This represents the highest ever number of new approvals.
- 1.21 Preparation and training groups have been held for all prospective mainstream foster carers. The training, which is delivered by the fostering team, involves foster carers as well as care leavers. Connected persons foster carers are also invited to attend this training. Virtual Reality films of the experiences of children entering foster care were introduced as part of this training during the year.
- 1.22 One of the main areas of focus for the service has been to improve the quality of support given to foster carers. This has included ensuring consistency of the supervisory relationship, regular visiting patterns and that annual reviews of the foster carers' placement take place. These measures have resulted in improvements in the retention of foster carers, foster carer satisfaction and compliance with Fostering Regulations and form an integral part of the Fostering Transformation Project.
- 1.23 Foster carer training is provided through the Council's Organisational Development Team. This includes both mandatory courses ensuring that foster carers have the training necessary to undertake their role, and more in-depth training for those carers who want to develop specialisms or a deeper knowledge of a subject area, for example attachment or caring for teenagers. The Organisational Development Team offer is supplemented by Foster Carers being able to access training available through Adult Education. There is also an extensive e-learning offer for foster carers.
- 1.24 Foster carer feedback in relation to training has become more regular through the participation of a foster carer in workforce development planning. This has led, for example, to a condensed refresher course for mandatory training being introduced rather than foster carers being expected to repeat the full training programme every three years.
- 1.25 The Fostering Recruitment and Development Officer continues to drive Coventry's innovative approach to recruiting foster carers. This includes a market leading use of digital media advertising and participation in yearly regional projects to jointly fund the production of recruitment films. The film produced in May 2018, "There was a Boy", was shortlisted for a Regional RTS Television Award for short form films.
- 1.26 Alongside digital marketing there is on-going activity to strengthen relationships with business partners, faith and community groups to broaden the opportunities to recruit foster carers. There is a strong media presence established with interactions from media and existing carers. This has included both work with several churches and other faith groups and attendance at Coventry Pride and Godiva festivals.
- 1.27 The service produces a monthly Foster Carer Newsletter providing up to date and relevant information. This includes contributions from a range of partners including a regular section produced by the Foster Carer Association.
- 1.28 Coventry continues to have an active and engaged Foster Carer Association. All Coventry approved foster carers are members of the association, although participation is voluntary. The Foster Carer Association meets monthly and invite members of the service to attend meetings to hear foster carer's views. It also has a very active closed Facebook page which allows foster carers to communicate between themselves. The association is consulted on changes to practice and contributes to a range of service activities such as the planning of

foster carer training, the welcome event for new foster carers, interviews for new staff members and co-facilitating training for foster carers and staff. The Association have worked closely with the service to develop a mentoring scheme for foster carers and continue to run both Foster Carer support groups and social events for Foster Carers.

- 1.29 The Association has reviewed its membership and officer roles. The Foster Carer Association has re-elected a full management committee and has a clear work plan focusing on:
- Representing foster carers' views
 - Raising awareness and celebrating the role of foster carers
 - Providing peer support and social opportunities for foster carers and children
 - Service improvement.
- 1.24 Events where the service and Council acknowledges the valuable work of our foster carers in meeting the needs of looked after children have been held during 2018/19. These have included regular welcome events for newly approved foster carers, an annual recognition event, a foster carers conference and a Christmas Event. This year a Sons and Daughters events for birth children of foster carers commenced, and further events are planned to take place twice a year. These events have proven to be successful with positive feedback from the foster carers and children who attended.
- 1.25 The service provides out of hours telephone support for foster carers outside office hours through the fostering service on call rota.
- 1.26 One of the service priorities is to develop an emergency foster carer scheme between 2019/20. An initial rota of volunteers was started in September 2019 but ceased as most carers matched with these placements chose to move on to longer term placements. The service is reviewing the scheme with the aim of relaunching it in 2020.
- 1.27 Support to Connected Persons Foster Carers and Special Guardians has continued to develop with a monthly support group being organised by the Fostering Service and a social event being organised in August 2018.
- 1.28 A key priority for the service is to achieve the targeted growth in the number of looked after children placed with internal foster carers. The average number of children placed in internal mainstream fostering provision rose from 200 in March 2018, to 217 in March 2019.
- 1.29 There were 46 households deregistered in 2018/19 compared with 47 in 2017/18. All carers are offered exit interviews with a manager in the service and their feedback has been used to improve service development and outcomes. This includes connected persons carers who obtain Special Guardianship orders for the children they are caring for.
- 1.30 There were 60 connected carer households with 84 children placed as at 31 March 2019 which is an increase from 49 households in 31st March 2018. 36 connected carer households were approved in 2018/19 compared to 44 in 2017/18. 28 connected carer households were deregistered in 2018/19. As these placements settle and become stable carers are encouraged to apply for Special Guardianship orders to achieve longer term stability.
- 1.31 Of those foster carers approved by Coventry 8 households transferred from other fostering agencies. This represents 26% of total mainstream fostering approvals.
- 1.32 In 2016, the Coventry fostering service introduced a Foster Carer Support Strategy to improve standards for the support of foster carers. The strategy was refreshed and relaunched in May 2018. This relaunch was promoted throughout Children's Services through a programme of internal communications including workshops with children's social work teams co-facilitated by foster carers.

- 1.33 The Fostering Panel continues to play a crucial role. Work has been undertaken with Panel members to ensure that they make evidence based, analytical decisions and provide a welcoming experience to those attending. 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.
- 1.34 In July 2018 a full time Panel Advisor was appointed. The panel chair resigned in August 2018. A new Panel Chair was appointed in February 2019. Annual Panel Training took place in October 2018, which centred on evidence-based decision making.
- 1.35 The Panel has continued to provide the service with detailed feedback on the quality of the work discussed and has noted continued improvements in the assessments and foster carer reviews. Feedback to the Panel from those attending has demonstrated a significant improvement in the experience of applicants whose case is being presented.
- 1.36 A specialist foster carer scheme, Next Steps, was launched in May 2018 to take complex children either from residential care or as an alternative to residential care. To date there have been three successful placements. The scheme will continue to be promoted and there is a plan to increase the numbers of carers for this scheme.
- 1.37 Currently there are two carer households which provide parent and baby placements. It is planned to deliver targeted campaigns to attract potential carers to the parent and child scheme and the Next Steps scheme as outlined in 1.34
- 1.38 **The priorities for service going forward are:**
- Improve the outcomes that children looked after by Coventry City Council achieve
 - Continuing work to increase the proportion of looked after children placed in an in-house fostering placement approved by Coventry City Council
 - Continue to work with the Transformation Project to maximise internal fostering resources and achieve the targets set by the Transformation Board
 - Continue to ensure that, where appropriate, looked after children are placed with connected persons and that these arrangements are well assessed and supported. Where possible and appropriate, these carers will be supported to apply for Special Guardianship orders. This promotes permanence outcomes for the children they care for
 - Further develop the in-house Next Steps scheme
 - Relaunch an in house out of hours rota of foster carers to ensure emergency placements are available as needed outside office hours
 - Develop provision of and support to parent and child fostering
 - Maintain an assertive and robust focus on marketing, recruitment and the assessment of foster carers
 - Continue to maximise the capacity of internal foster carers and increase the children placed with them
 - Review and strengthen the training and development offer to foster carers and continue to offer specific support to sons and daughters
 - Provide workshops and team development sessions to children's social workers on working effectively with foster carers.

1 Options considered and recommended proposal

That the fostering report is noted.

2 Results of consultation undertaken

2.1 Not applicable

3 Timetable for implementing this decision

3.1 Not applicable

4 Comments from Director of Finance and Corporate Services

5 Financial implications

5.1 In-house fostering fees – Outturn 2018/19

	2017/18 £000	2018/19 £000
Budget	6,044	5,392
Expenditure	4,570	4,719

Expenditure is increasing as part of the Children's Transformation Programme. This enables savings in other areas, specifically the external placements budget, which are significantly in excess of the additional spend on in-house fostering. The budget reduction between 2017/18 and 2018/19 was a realignment to reflect transformation targets. The budget will increase as appropriate in future years to reflect increases targets. Additional resources will also be made available as necessary to expand the internal Fostering Team to support the increasing numbers of foster carers.

Fostering fees for 2019/20 were increased by 2% from 2018/19 levels in order to recognise the impact of inflation and to ensure that our rates remain competitive with those of surrounding local authorities. The rate of fostering allowances paid by Coventry continues to be above recommended levels set by the Department for Education.

5.2 Legal implications

National Minimum Standards require that the executive side of the local authority receive

- written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every 3 months;
- monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children;
- satisfy themselves that the provider is complying with the conditions of registration.

6. Other 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 fostering service contributes to the Council plan in the following ways:

- Locally connected: foster carers keep children safe and contribute to them getting the best start in life. In addition, by developing the skills of foster carers this will improve outcomes for children. By keeping children local, with local foster carers, this means that a multi-agency package of support to be developed for each child more easily

- Delivering our priorities with fewer resources: by developing a robust fostering service, this means less reliance on more expensive external placements.

•
6.2 How is risk being managed?

This risk is being managed through the Fostering Transformation Project which reports to the Children's Services Transformation Board and Children's Services Leadership Team. 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 and enable looked after children to be placed closer to their home. This will mean better outcomes for looked after children in Coventry.

6.4 Equalities / EIA

Following incremental changes to the Service this will be updated in January 2020.

6.5 Implications for (or impact on) climate change and the environment

None.

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None.

Report author(s):

Name and job title:

Janet Denny
Interim Operational Lead - Fostering

Directorate: People

Tel and email contact: 07525908716 JANET.DENNY@coventry.gov.uk

Enquiries should be directed to the above person.

Contributor/approver name	Title	Directorate or organisation	Date doc sent out	Date response received or approved
Contributors:				
Janet Denny	Interim Operational Lead Fostering	People		21 December 2019
Katherine Robinson	Operational Lead Fostering	People		21 December 2019
Paul Smith	Strategic Lead-looked after children	People		6 January 2020
Nicola David	Finance	Place		18 October 2019
Usha Patel	Governance Services Officer	Place		7 January 2020
Names of approvers: (officers and members)				
John Gregg	Director of Children's Service	People		3 January 2020
Rachael Sugars	Finance Manager	Place		18 October 2019
Julie Newman	Legal Services	Place		6 January 2019