
Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

23 September 2020

Name of Cabinet Member:

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People - Councillor Pat Seaman

Director Approving Submission of the report:

Director of Children Services

Ward(s) affected:

None

Title:

Coventry Fostering Service Annual Report 2019/20

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 2019 and March 2020.

The performance of Coventry's 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 continuing success of the service in increasing both the number and the proportion of looked after children who are placed with foster carers approved by Coventry City Council as part of the ongoing work of the Fostering Transformation Project. It also highlights the ongoing development of the work of the Connected Persons Teams.

Recommendations:

- 1. The Fostering Service Annual Report 2019/20 is accepted.**

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?

- Yes – Corporate Parenting Board

Will this report go to Council?

No

Report title: Coventry Fostering Service 2019/20

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 This report considers the activity by the Coventry Fostering Service during the year April 2019 to March 2020.
- 1.2 Coventry City Council is committed to ensuring that, wherever possible, children are supported to live with their birth parents. Where this has not been possible and children become looked after, it is preferable that they are placed within a family setting. It is the aim of the council that wherever possible this will be within a foster placement approved by Coventry rather than through commissioning an external placement. Through guidance on delegated authority, there is a recognition that foster carers should be empowered to take on the day to day tasks of parenting in the same way as any good parent would
- 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. The regulatory framework for fostering sets out the minimum standards expected to ensure that the care provided by foster carers is adequate to ensure that those children placed within fostering placements are well cared for and achieve good outcomes.
- 1.4 Fostering placements are referred to as either mainstream or connected persons. Connected persons fostering refers to those households who offer to provide care to a child known to them, usually a relative. Mainstream foster care 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. Mainstream carers can be approved to care for between 1 and 3 children at a time and can care for children throughout the age range.
- 1.5 The Fostering Service sits within Children's Services as part of the Looked After Children service. It is comprised of 5 teams and has responsibility for the recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers and the assessment and support of Special Guardians.
- 1.6 A fifth team was created in April 2019 to increase the capacity for connected persons assessment and to enable those who support and supervise connected persons foster carers and Special Guardians to specialise in this work. There has been a significant rise in the proportion of children cared for in these types of placements in the past 4 years and combining the supervision of these households has enabled greater focus in the mainstream support team on growing in house mainstream capacity. In addition to the social work teams there is a Recruitment and Development Officer and a Panel Advisor both of which report to the Operational Lead.
- 1.7 An additional role of Placements Liaison Officer was also created in April 2019 to support the efficient matching of in house foster carers to children requiring a foster placement. This role has supported the service to significantly increase occupancy rates of in-house household since its creation.
- 1.8 **The Fostering Transformation Project**

The Fostering Transformation Project has been ongoing since April 2016. The Transformation Project targets were updated and extended in both February 2019 and April 2020 and the current target for the Fostering Transformation Project is to have 286 occupied internal mainstream placements by 01/04/2021. The aim of the 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.

1.9 The number of children placed in internal mainstream placements rose from 225 on 31/3/19 to 259 on 31/3/20. This is a 4th annual rise in this number from a baseline of 149 in April 2016.

1.10 At the end of March 2020, there were 698 looked after children. Of the 698 children 504 children were placed in foster care of which 357 were placed with Coventry foster carers compared with 314 at the end of March 2019. This equates to 71% of those children in foster care. 147 children were placed with independent fostering agencies and this is a further reduction from the compared with the 183 on 31/3/19. Of the total number of looked after children 51.1% are with Coventry foster carers. This is a further improvement in this percentage from a baseline in March 2015 when only 22.8% were placed in internal foster care.

1.11 **Marketing, Recruitment and Mainstream Approvals**

1.12 The Fostering Recruitment and Development Officer continues to drive Coventry's innovative approach to recruiting foster carers. The service took part in a 3rd regional recruitment film project across the West Midlands in May 2019. The Recruitment and Development Officer continues to chair the West Midlands Fostering Recruitment Forum and hosts a nationwide social media network for local authority fostering recruitment workers.

1.13 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. This has included both work with a number of churches and other faith groups and attendance at Coventry Pride and Godiva festivals. A specific recruitment event was hosted in May 2019 to recruit foster carers from Coventry's Polish Community. During the past 12 months, the Fostering Service has initiated regular informal drop in recruitment sessions at both a local coffee shop and a local LGBT venue. The team has quickly adjusted in light of Covid 19 to host recruitment events online with live, interactive sessions with members of the recruitment team. These are advertised on all our online platforms.

1.14 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 Facebook and Twitter.

Our online content on the website is regularly updated.

1.15 The following table provides statistics for patterns over time in relation to the recruitment of mainstream foster carers:

Mainstream carers	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Approved households	148	152	170	184	187
Number of initial enquiries	312	387	703	815	609
Assessments started at stage 1	112	186	143	151	91
Assessments commencing to stage 2	39	66	61	58	58
Number of households approved	20	25	31	33	21
Conversion Rate - Enquiry to full assessment	13%	17%	9%	4.4%	9.5%
Conversion rate – stage 2 assessment to approval	51%	38%	51%	57%	36%
Conversion rate enquiry to approval	6%	6%	4%	4.04%	3.4%

- 1.16 In the period between April 2019 and March 2020 there was a significant decrease in the number of enquiries to the Fostering Service. Work is underway to explore the reasons for this change and refresh and update the marketing strategy. However, the Marketing and Recruitment Officer was absent from work between November 2018 and May 2019 which is likely to have been a contributing factor.
- 1.17 In the same period, though, there has also been a drop in the conversion rate from enquiry to approval.
- 1.18 The conversion rate between full assessment commencing and approval has also decreased significantly. An analysis of the factors contributing to this decrease will be undertaken by September 2020.
- 1.19 There was a rise in the percentage of foster carers from a BAME background approved by Coventry City Council from 13% to 15%. However, this is still lower than the percentage of looked after children from a BAME background which is approximately 30%. There is ongoing focus on this area in our marketing strategy.
- 1.20 There was a reduction in the number of new fostering households approved during 2019-20 from previous years. However, the impact of this on overall service targets was offset by increases in occupancy of approved fostering placements.

1.21 **Occupancy of Mainstream Placements**

Coventry's mainstream foster carers now provide an average of 1.8 approved placements per household. The total number of approved placements on 31/3/20 was 330. Over the past 12 months, the Fostering Service has focused on increasing the percentage of these available placements which are occupied by children needing a placement.

This percentage has risen from 66% on 31/3/19 to 78% on 31/3/20.

- 1.22 The increase in occupancy is a result of carers being supported and developed to care for a larger number and greater range of young people and are being more actively engaged in the fostering task. The creation of the Placements Liaison Officer role alongside the close working between the Fostering Service and the Placements Team have been significant contributors to this development.

1.23 In January 2020, the Pathways to Care policy was updated. This policy provides a measure of financial support to be made available to local authority foster carers to both secure permanence for children and increase mainstream fostering capacity.

1.24 Connected Persons Fostering

The number of children cared for in a connected persons fostering arrangement approved by Coventry City Council has risen significantly in the past 4 years. This trend continued in 2019/20 with 86 children being cared for in this way on 1/4/19 and 98 on 1/4/20.

The growth in this number is now beginning to stabilise and the service is actively promoting legal permanence through Special Guardianship for children for whom this is the preferred outcome.

1.25 Foster Carer Retention

In 2019-20 18 mainstream fostering households ceased to foster. No foster carers chose to transfer to an independent fostering agency. One chose to move to a neighbouring local fostering service.

The retention of foster carers is kept under regular review and all those who choose to move on are offered an exit interview with a manager in the service.

Reason	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Permanence plan for child (including Staying Put)	2	0	1	2	4
Transfer to another LA fostering service	1	0	1	1	1
Transfer to an independent fostering agency	0	0	0	0	0
Personal circumstances e.g. separation, bereavement, retirement	12	19	12	10	12
Dissatisfied with quality of service	1	0	0	0	0
Safeguarding (Termination)	0	0	0	0	0
Resigned prior to quality of care and safeguarding issues	4	1	0	2	1
Other – including death	0	1	0	1	0
Total	20	21	13	15	18

1.26 No carer has cited dissatisfaction with the support provided by the service as a reason for them ceasing to foster. The majority (89%) of those who have ceased to foster have done so due to retirement, changes in circumstances or because they have continued to care for a previously fostered child under a different arrangement.

1.27 Of those foster carers approved by Coventry 4 households transferred from fostering from an independent fostering agency. This represents 19% of total mainstream fostering approvals.

1.28 Support to Foster Carers

1.29 The service has continued to focus on the consistency of support given to foster carers through ensuring consistency of the supervisory relationship, regular visiting patterns and that annual reviews of the foster carer's work take place.

1.30 The Annual Foster Carers' Conference took place on 16/5/19. This included both a key note speech and a choice of workshops as well as an opportunity for foster carers to meet directly both with each other and a number of those who provide services which they and the fostered children access.

- 1.31 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 Carers Association.
- 1.32 Events where the service and council acknowledges the valuable work of foster carers in meeting the needs of looked after children have been held during 2019/20. These have included a regular welcome event for newly approved foster carers, an annual recognition event and a seasonal celebration.
- 1.33 The service also provides support to the birth children of foster carers through sons and daughters events. These events are held twice a year and provide the opportunity for children who are part of a fostering family to spend time together both having fun and having the opportunity to get support from others in a similar position to themselves.
- 1.34 The service provides an 'out of hours' telephone support for foster carers at all times - outside office hours through the fostering service on call rota.
- 1.35 The service runs a monthly support group for connected persons foster carers and Special Guardians alongside regular social events for those carers and their households.
- 1.36 The service has been developing a formal buddying scheme for foster carers to receive support from one another which launches in May 2020.
- 1.37 All foster carers approved by Coventry City Council are provided with membership of the Fostering Network. This membership includes access to the Fostering Network's independent Advice and Mediation service.

1.38 Training and Development of Foster Carers

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 particular specialisms or a deeper knowledge of a subject area, for example attachment or caring for teenagers.

- 1.39 The Fostering Service contributes to monthly meetings to plan and coordinate the training offer. These meetings also include a foster carer representative. This ensures that foster carers' views directly influence the training provided. This year, for example, as a result of feedback the structure and content of the first aid training was reviewed and foster carers have reported finding the revised course significantly more useful to them.
- 1.40 The Fostering Service has supplemented the training offer for foster carers by providing a range of developmental activities for foster carers including presentations at support groups and learning resources. Workshops have also been provided on topics such as adverse childhood experiences and social pedagogy.
- 1.41 The service also continues to run regular refresher training for those foster carers who have completed the mandatory training. Foster carers are expected to undertake this every 3 years in order to keep up to date with their practise.
- 1.42 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. The introduction of the use of a virtual reality training package as part of this training has been very well received by course attendees.

1.43 The service continues to support newly approved foster carers in completing the mandatory Training Support and Development Standards (TSD). There is an adapted version of these standards for connected persons foster carers and there is an expectation that any connected person carer completes this within 18 months of approval.

1.44 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 Carers Association.

1.45 **The Foster Carer Association**

1.46 All Coventry approved foster carers are members of the Coventry Foster Carer Association although participation is voluntary. The Foster Carer Association meet monthly and feedback the views of foster carers to the service on a regular basis. The association is consulted on changes to practice and contributes to a range of service activities such as foster carer training, the welcome event for new foster carers, interviews for new staff members and co facilitating training for foster carers and applicants. A foster carer also sits on the governing body of Coventry's virtual school.

1.47 The Foster Carer Association support Coventry's foster carers through hosting a social media group, running support groups for foster carers and hosting social events. In August 2019, the Foster Carer Association ran a camping weekend which was open to all fostering households.

1.48 The Foster Carer Association has requested that members are more routinely consulted by the wider Children's Services and this is being carried forward through consultations about the provision of CAMHS services to Looked After Children and through consultation about the commissioned arrangement for supervised family time for fostered children.

1.49 The Foster Carer Association annual general meeting was due to take place in March 2020 and was postponed as a result of Covid 19 lockdown measures. As a result, the association is currently dormant. It is hoped a new committee can be elected as lockdown eases.

1.50 **Fostering Panel**

1.51 Maria Hunt was appointed as Fostering Panel Chair in February 2019 and continues to fulfil this role. Siobhan Haney continues to act as Fostering Panel Vice chair and a second vice chair, Sharon Chetwynd, was appointed in February 2020. Fostering Panel business continues to be busy with the Panel meeting on 41 occasions. Panels, alongside the new mainstream applications, reviewed 51 connected persons fostering assessments, 15 long term fostering matches and 67 foster carer annual reviews. Panel was quorate on each occasion.

1.52 The Panel Advisor takes the lead in co-ordinating the recruitment, induction and annual appraisal of panel members. During 2019-20 she also arranged 2 training days for panel members alongside facilitating their private study through sharing information from guidance and research with panel members.

1.53 The Panel provides the service with detailed feedback on the quality of the work discussed and has noted continued improvements in the quality of the work presented by members of the service. The Panel has, however, raised issues around the quality of connected persons assessment reports that have been externally commissioned.

1.54 Feedback to the Panel from those attending continues to demonstrate that they experience a positive and welcoming meeting in which information is considered fairly.

1.55 **Fostering Schemes**

- 1.56 The Next Steps fostering scheme was launched in May 2018 to provide intensively supported fostering placements to those children who might otherwise be placed in a children's home
- 1.57 . Recruitment to the scheme continues and has been slower than the target set with 3 foster carers having participated in it to date and 1 deciding in August 2019 to return to mainstream fostering. However, the 2 existing placements supported through the scheme remain stable which has meant significantly improved outcomes for the children placed with Next Steps carers.
- 1.58 The Fostering Service also runs an out of hours fostering scheme to provide placements to those children who need these in an emergency outside office hours. There has been active recruitment to this scheme to develop its ability to provide sufficient placements for these children. However, demand for these placements is still greater than availability.

1.59 **Service Performance**

- 1.60 During the past twelve months, regular meetings have taken place across the service to consider the specific issues for fostering best practice. The topics for these meetings have included the regulatory and inspection framework for fostering work and learning from serious case reviews which involve foster carers.
- 1.61 The Insight and LCS teams have also worked closely with the service to produce regular performance reports and to ensure that everyone in the service and those in professional support fully understand the electronic case recording system.
- 1.62 The Fostering Service actively participates in both regional and national forums to promote improvements in our support to fostered children. The Operational Lead chairs the West Midlands Regional Forum for local authority fostering registered managers.

1.63 **The Impact of Covid 19**

- 1.64 At the end of the period covered by this annual report, central government instituted the national lockdown measures as a result of the global Covid 19 pandemic. The long- term impacts of this on the Fostering Service are yet to be determined.
- 1.65 However, to date there have been a number of areas in which the lockdown has affected the service and our foster carers.

These include:

- Additional pressure on fostering households as children are spending more time at home.
- Adjustment to undertaking many activities including meetings, visits and Fostering Panel through virtual platforms.
- Changes to arrangements for children to see their families.
- Reduction in the availability of fostering vacancies as foster carers are unable to include new fostered children in their households due to health vulnerabilities.
- A period of around 6 weeks in which new enquiries to foster slowed significantly.

1.66 **Future Priorities**

Priorities for service going forward are:

- Continuing work to increase the proportion of looked after children placed in an in-house fostering placement.
- Maintain an assertive and robust focus on marketing, recruitment and assessment of foster carers.

- Review and focus on the effectiveness of recruitment of foster carers from diverse backgrounds.
- Maximise the capacity of internal foster carers and increase the children placed in internally.
- Undertake an analysis of conversion rates between enquiry and approval.
- Extend the range of in-house fostering provision to include increased availability for parent and child placements and placements for children with complex additional needs.
- Recruit further carers to the in house out of hours rota of foster carers to ensure placements are available as needed outside office hours.
- Continue to review and strengthen the training and development offer to foster carers.
- Continue to work with children’s teams to focus on permanence and placement stability.
- Continue to ensure that where appropriate looked after children are placed in connected persons care and that, where they are these arrangements are well assessed and supported.
- Review and improve the quality of recording undertaken in the service.
- Work with commissioning colleagues to improve the quality of assessments that are completed on a sessional basis.
- Continue to grow and develop the buddying scheme for foster carers.
- Ensure foster carers are consulted about all changes that affect their role.

2. Options considered and recommended proposal

2.1 That the Fostering Report 2019/20 is accepted.

3. Results of consultation undertaken

3.1 Not applicable.

4. Timetable for implementing this decision

4.1 Not applicable.

5. Comments from Director of Finance & Corporate Resources and Director of Law and Governance

Financial implications

5.1 In-House Fostering Fees Outturn 2010/20

	2018/19 £000	2019/20 £000
Budget	5,932	5,566
Expenditure	4,719	5,435

Internal fostering continues to be one of the most cost-effective placements for Looked After Children, on a unit cost basis. 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 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.

Legal implications

5.2 The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 state that the fostering service provider must compile a written statement in relation to the fostering service (“the statement of purpose”) which consists of—

- (a) a statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service, and
- (b) a statement as to the services and facilities (including any parent and child arrangements) provided by the fostering service.

The fostering service provider must provide a copy of the statement of purpose to the Chief Inspector, place a copy on their website (if they have one), and make copies available, upon request, to—

- (a) any person working for the purposes of the fostering service,
- (b) any foster parent or prospective foster parent of the fostering service,
- (c) any child placed with a foster parent by the fostering service, and
- (d) the parent of any such child.

Under Statutory Guidance the fostering service must compile a Statement of Purpose, which sets out the aims and objectives of the service as a whole, and the services, and facilities which are provided (including the provision of any “parent and child arrangements”). The statement must be reviewed and updated as necessary, but at least annually and published on the provider’s website (if they have one), with a copy provided to Ofsted.

The statement of purpose is placed on the Coventry City Council website and can be accessed through the link:

https://www.coventry.gov.uk/downloads/file/31786/fostering_service_statement_of_purpose

6. Other Implications

6.1 How will this contribute to the Council Plan (www.coventry.gov.uk/councilplan/)?

The Fostering Service contributes to the wellbeing of children through arranging for a fostering 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 both management oversight in the Looked After Service, participation in the Placements Board which reports to the Transformation Board. This provides 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?

An effective Fostering Service ensures that looked after children are well cared for and promotes their best outcomes. Enabling more fostered children to be placed with 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.

6.4 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA)

An Equality Impact Needs Assessment is to be updated in August 2020.

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

None.

6.6 Implications for partner organisations?

None.

Report author(s):

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Jeanette Ollive	Project Manager	Transformation		
Usha Patel	Governance Services Officer	Law and Governance	09.09.2020	09.09.2020
Bonita Moulton	Team Manager (Support)	Fostering Service		20 July 2020
Claire Brown	Team Manager (Support)	Fostering Service		20 July 2020
Zelma Van Rhyn	Team Manager (Recruitment)	Fostering Service		20 July 2020
Jo Smith	Team Manager (Assessment)	Fostering Service		20 July 2020
Debbie Corkett	Fostering Panel Advisor	Fostering Service		20 July 2020
Rachel Brown	Fostering Recruitment & Development Officer	Fostering Service		20 July 2020
Other members				
Names of approvers for submission:				
Finance: Nicola David	Lead Accountant	Finance		20 July 2020
Finance: Rachael Sugars	Finance Manager	Finance		20 July 2020
Legal: Julie Newman	Director	Law and Governance		8 September 2020
Director: John Gregg	Director	Children's Services		27 July 2020
Member: Councillor P Seamen	Cabinet Member	Children & Young People		

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