

**9 June 2014****Agenda Item: 7****REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE**  
**FOSTERING SERVICE: ANNUAL REPORT APRIL 2013- MARCH 2014****Purpose of the Report**

1. This report provides information on the activity and performance of the fostering service from April 2013 to March 2014.

**Information and Advice**

2. Nottinghamshire saw a rapid increase in the number of children in care during the period 2008 to 2012. The number of children in the authority's care rose from 455 to 875. This created a significant demand, in a relatively short period of time, for placements for these children. The authority's fostering service was unable to meet the demand and, as a result, the authority was required to seek placements from independent fostering or residential providers.
3. The average weekly cost of an independent fostering placement is £829. The average, weekly cost of an independent residential placement is £2,129. The average weekly cost of the authority's foster care provision is £414. Through the authority's Transformation Programme, work began in February 2013 to invest in the growth and development of the authority's fostering service. The authority has an ambitious savings target of £6.59m over the next three years (2014-17) and intends to achieve these savings by reducing reliance upon high cost independent fostering and residential provision. To do this, the authority needs to recruit 160 new foster carers over the next three years.
4. To support the growth and development of the authority's fostering service, the authority has invested in the fostering service with the expectation of making longer term savings. Thus, in 2013/14, an additional £42,500 was agreed to support the advertising and marketing function for the recruitment of new foster carers; two full time equivalent posts (temporary) were established in the Framework team to improve data recording/collection processes; an additional five full time equivalent social workers (permanent) were appointed within the fostering service to concentrate on the assessments of prospective foster carers and to bring about improvements in timescales from enquiry to approval; two additional full time equivalent family worker posts (temporary) were appointed to the fostering service to support existing foster carers in maintaining placement stability for the children in their care.

5. Supported by the transformation team, and colleagues within corporate communications, the fostering service's recruitment team has brought about significant changes to the way in which the authority seeks to attract people to foster for Nottinghamshire. In 2013/14, the web pages have been updated and refreshed; the hits on Google and Facebook have risen from 2,211 in October 2012 to 3,831 in October 2013; extended enquiry hours have been provided through a partnership with the authority's customer service centre; links have been developed with Nottinghamshire Police with a view to retiring police officers being recruited as foster carers and there has been a proactive campaign to encourage foster carers approved by the independent fostering sector, and caring for a Nottinghamshire child, to consider transferring to Nottinghamshire.
6. This changed advertising and marketing approach has resulted in positive outcomes. In 2013/14, 46 new foster households were approved compared with 32 in the previous business year - an increase of 40%. Whilst the number of enquiries was lower in 2013/14 than in 2012/13 (566 enquiries in 2013/14 compared with 578 in 2012/13), the conversion rate (enquiry to approval) was higher (8% in 2013/14 compared with 6% in 2012/13).
7. Whilst the recruitment activity was positive, the retention of foster carers was less positive in 2013/14 than in 2012/13. The authority lost 36 foster households in 2013/14 compared with a loss of 10 foster households in 2012/13. The reasons for people ceasing to foster were choosing to retire (due to reasons of age and/or health); a change in circumstance (relationship breakdown/ change in job and location) and for safeguarding reasons, that is, when the agency did not consider them to be suitable to continue to act as foster carers.
8. In addition to changed recruitment practice, in July 2013 the Government introduced amendments to the Fostering Services Regulations 2011. These amendments required fostering agencies to change the way in which prospective foster carers are assessed. The fostering service's assessment business processes had to be redesigned and, testament to the commitment of the fostering team managers to ensure a timely but safe implementation, a new assessment model was introduced with effect from 1 January 2014.
9. The fostering service has strengthened its support strategy to foster carers and birth children of foster carers. In 2013/14, the first, County-wide Sons and Daughters event took place and a further event is planned in October 2014. Under the leadership of the recruitment team manager, a Sons and Daughters' council has been established and the inaugural meeting of this council will take place in August 2014. The contribution of the foster carers' birth children, to the outcomes for a fostered child, has long been appreciated and recognised.
10. The fostering service has a good reputation in respect of the support it provides to its foster carers. In 2013/14, the support strategy has been further enhanced by increasing the level of foster carer engagement and participation

in service developments. Foster carers have been involved in recruitment activity, media interviews, the development of the web pages and a group of foster carers has attended consultation forums regarding activity within the transformation programme. A new initiative was introduced in January 2014 whereby foster carers and supervising social workers meet, three times a year, for joint team meetings within their locality. This initiative has been extremely well received by the foster carer community - 40 foster carers attended the first Bassetlaw meeting in April. The fostering service intends to continue to support its foster carers, in their professional development and professional identity, through a varied programme of learning, training and developmental opportunities.

11. There is a real feeling of energy within the foster carer community. This has been evidenced by staff, the fostering panel, the editorial group of the fostering magazine (Fostering in Nottinghamshire) and by colleagues in the transformation programme. This energy and commitment has been evidenced at the quarterly Countywide liaison meetings with the Service Director for Children's Social Care and has been noted by an external provider of advice and mediation services, The Fostering Network. It is considered that the foster carer community in Nottinghamshire feels proud of its achievements and feels a deep sense of commitment to children in the care of the authority. There is very much a "can do/will do" attitude throughout all of the service - foster carers, fostering staff and business support staff.
12. This commitment has also manifested itself in a changed approach to long term family finding for children in the care system. Under the leadership of the recruitment team manager a new home-finding process has been established. Some children, for example, may have a changed adoption plan or may be living in a residential placement. Through partnership working with the child's social worker, and the placements team, profiles of these children are featured on the online learning and information portal for foster carers (Fronter). This initiative is in its early stages but it is anticipated that, in identifying the children who are waiting for a family to existing foster families, connections and links will be made.
13. To support the home finding activity for these children, and in particular those children aged 11 years and over, the fostering service introduced a new fee paid fostering scheme in April 2014. This is called the 11+ scheme and initial indicators are positive that this will attract appropriately skilled and experienced people to foster an older child. The terms and conditions of the 11+ scheme are competitive with the independent foster sector and, as an outcome of the authority's investment in the fostering service, the playing field is beginning to become more level. The impact for the authority is increased internal fostering capacity at a lower unit cost than that provided by the independent sector. The impact for the looked after children population is increased placement choice local to communities of origin.
14. A proposal to reshape the fostering service is to be considered by the Divisional Leadership Team. The intention is to continue to expand the foster carer community across all localities and extend specialist fostering provision

within the service. The latter includes expanding the therapeutic fostering service (foster placements with therapy provided by therapists within the fostering team), expanding fostering provision for disabled children (by providing fee paid foster carers who can provide long term placements) and creating a specialist team for foster carers who are connected to the child they look after (family and friends).

### **Other Options Considered**

15. This report is for information only.

### **Reason/s for Recommendation/s**

16. This report is for information only.

### **Statutory and Policy Implications**

17. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, finance, human resources, human rights, the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, service users, sustainability and the environment and ways of working and where such implications are material they are described below. Consultation has not been undertaken as advice was not required.

### **Financial Implications**

18. There is a commitment, within Children's Social Care, to provide the fostering service budget with £196,000 to support achievement of its business objectives in 2014/15.

### **RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 1) That the information on the activity and performance of the fostering service from April 2013 to March 2014 be noted.

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### **Constitutional Comments**

19. As this report is for noting only, no Constitutional Comments are required.

**Financial Comments (KLA 21/05/14)**

20. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

**Background Papers and Published Documents**

None.

**Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

All.

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