

18<sup>th</sup> January 2021

Agenda Item: 5

## **REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, YOUTH, FAMILIES AND SOCIAL WORK**

### **DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOSTERING SERVICE**

#### **Purpose of the Report**

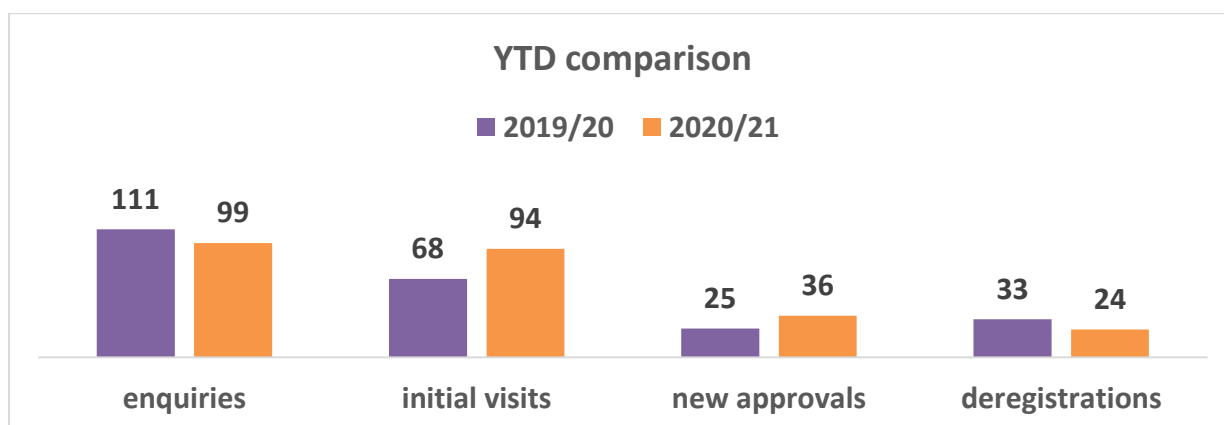
1. This report seeks approval of the proposal to further develop and grow the Nottinghamshire County Council fostering provision in order to:
  - build on positive progress so far to create more high-quality placements for Nottinghamshire children and young people
  - develop a positive culture within the service which will attract new carers as well as encourage existing carers to remain with the Council
  - reduce the pressure on the placements budget by avoiding the significant cost of external placements, and
  - secure the best possible value from the placements budget.
2. The report therefore seeks approval to establish the following posts in the Fostering Service from April 2021:
  - 2 FTE Social Workers (Hay Band B) to manage increased recruitment and assessment activity
  - 1 FTE Panel Administrator (NJE Grade 3) to support increased fostering panel activity
  - 0.5 FTE Panel Manager (Hay Band C) to manage the increase in fostering panel activity
  - 1 FTE Business Support Administrator (NJE Grade 3) to support increased recruitment and assessment activity
  - 1 FTE Advanced Practitioner (Hay Band C) to support assessment of new foster carersand to establish the following posts from April 2022:
  - 3 FTE Supervising Social Workers (Hay Band B) to manage increased foster carer caseloads.
3. The report also seeks approval of:

- an additional fostering panel each month (bringing the total to three)
- spend on increased marketing activity in order to amplify the number of quality enquiries received by the Fostering Service
- spend on assessment training in order to complete assessments as quickly and effectively as possible.

## Information

4. In February 2019 Committee gave approval to deliver a series of measures designed to increase the number of internal foster placements available. These included increased marketing activity and fostering information event frequency to improve the rate of initial enquiries, and the development of a Recruitment and Assessment Team to effectively manage the journey of prospective foster carers from initial enquiry to panel approval and to organise and monitor the ongoing training of foster carers. A Fostering Development project was implemented to plan and implement activity and monitor benefits delivery.
5. The key objectives of the project are to increase the capacity of the internal fostering service by at least 50 placements over three years to March 2023, and to retain existing carers. Growing and supporting the Council's foster carer capacity reduces the weekly cost of placements by approximately £400 per week and ensures that children and young people who need to be looked after can live in a nurturing family environment.
6. Key deliverables so far include:
  - the development of a targeted and robust marketing plan, including increased information events across the County and a visible presence in countywide publications – as a result enquiries and assessments have increased significantly and a third monthly approval panel is needed to manage the increase
  - the establishment of a dedicated Recruitment & Assessment Team which has been operational since October 2019 – this team has conducted the recruitment events and managed potential carers through the assessment process in a streamlined and efficient manner, in spite of the limitations imposed around face to face meetings during lockdown. The team is running eight times as many fostering information events as in 2019/20, and over a wider geographical spread – these are proving very popular, even via remote technology such as Teams and Zoom, and are generating a significant increase in enquiries
  - improvements to the fostering offer in order to attract and retain foster carers. This has included an increase and simplification of fees, better communication about the financial benefit for foster carers by way of clarity on fees, tax and other benefits, and new discounts for carers to make their income go further. Since these improvements have been made one significant success has been that not one of the foster carers has left the Council to work for an independent agency; on the contrary, an independent agency foster carer has come to work for the Council.
  - therapeutic training rolled out across all Supervising Social Workers, and which will now be rolled out across all foster carers, making Council fostering a truly therapeutic service.

7. These measures have led to an overall improvement in recruitment and retention performance.
8. Although the number of enquiries was high in the first half of the year they have dipped in September and October and so the year-to-date (YTD) total is actually lower this year than last. There are a number of factors which could have influenced this, including focussed campaigns at Nottingham City over the summer, and the effects of lockdown restrictions – people have perhaps decided to take stock rather than embark on something new in their lives.



9. However, this has not impacted upon the number of visits the team has made. The conversion rate of enquiries into visits in November 2019/20 was 61%; so far in 2020/21 it is 95%. This is due to an increase in the quality of the enquiries being made, due to focussed marketing effort and significantly more information events being held, and so enquiries are being made on an informed basis rather than speculatively. It is also due to the speed and efficiency in which enquiries are dealt with by the Recruitment & Assessment Team which has been in operation since November 2019.
10. There has been a net YTD increase of 12 new carers against a target of 14 for the full year. The number of assessments which are scheduled for panel forecast that the target will be met. This is due to positive improvements in both recruitment and retention of foster carers. Exit interviews suggest that the improved fostering offer is working well to reward and retain our carers.
11. The report to Committee in February 2019 indicated that a more ambitious target was considered but that 'this increases the financial risk of an as-yet unproven concept... This is an option which may be developed in a further proposal, dependent upon the success of the preferred approach.'
12. Diagnostic work carried out by Newton consultants over the Summer has ratified the concept of an invest-to-save approach to developing the fostering service even further in order to reduce reliance on external providers.
13. Given that the key indicators of success – increase in enquiries, increase in approvals, decrease in deregistrations and children and young people placed with foster carers - are all showing positive results, it is proposed that further investment is made to grow the

service more ambitiously and make savings against the pressure on the placements budget.

14. This proposal outlines an initiative which will deliver a stretch target of a further 47 foster carers on top of the existing target of 50, over a longer time period.
15. The costs of establishing the additional posts to deliver the stretch target are £0.219m in 2021/22 and £0.138m in 2022/23. The other running costs are £0.085m in 2021/22. These are described in more detail in the table in **paragraph 46**. This will be funded through reinvesting £0.441m in cashable benefits from the reduction in the weekly cost of foster placements.

**Activity necessary to deliver the stretch recruitment and savings target:**

**Fostering Panel**

16. In the context of new foster carer approvals, the role of the fostering panel is to make a recommendation on the suitability of people to be foster carers based on information prepared by the assessing social worker. Prior to the meeting, panel members read an assessment of the potential carer including supporting documentation from a variety of sources and consider areas they would like to discuss with the potential carer and their social worker.
17. As well as considering new applicants, panels are convened to see first reviews of recently approved foster carers, and reviews following concerns. This is good practice and in line with fostering regulations. It is equally as important to conduct first reviews and reviews following concerns as it is to approve new foster carers. The split of cases seen at panel is approximately 60% new approvals and 40% first reviews and reviews following concerns.
18. The current staffing establishment can conduct two panels per month, each with the capacity to see five cases. This is split on average into three new foster carers approvals and two first reviews or reviews following concerns. The total capacity between December and March for new foster carer approvals is therefore 36 cases.
19. There are currently 45 potential new foster carers booked into panels between December 2020 and March 2021. The number of new foster carer approvals will exceed the capacity of these panels by nine cases based on the bookings that are already in the pipeline. More bookings are being added on a weekly basis and so the number of bookings which exceed the capacity of existing panels is going to increase over the coming months.
20. It is clearly in the best interests of children and young people who need a caring family home that approvals are processed as early as we possibly can so that homes are available when they are needed.
21. For every child or young person who is placed in an internal foster placement instead of in an independent fostering agency placement, the Council saves approximately £434 per week. There is consequently a significant financial imperative supporting the approval of new carers as rapidly as possible. It is therefore proposed that a third panel is introduced each month to absorb the increase in new foster carer approvals.

22. The team that manages panels comprises 1 FTE Panel Manager and 1 FTE Panel Administrator. These posts carry out all planning and scheduling of bookings and invites to applicants and panel members, chase-up essential reports and documents required for panel, produce minutes, liaise with Agency Decision Makers to arrange the recruitment and annual reviews of panel members, ensure panel members are appropriately trained, and ensure all work associated with panel is completed within set timescales.
23. There is no capacity for the current Panel Manager to manage a third panel, and there is no cover for them for absences. It is therefore proposed that an addition 0.5 FTE Panel Manager (Hay Band C) post is established.
24. Neighbouring councils that run 2-3 panels per month have 2 FTE Panel Administrators. Since panels have been consistently full it has become apparent that there is too much work for 1 FTE Panel Administrator to manage, so the introduction of a third panel will need more resource. It is therefore proposed that a further 1 FTE Panel Administrator (NJE Grade 3) post is established to support the panel administration.
25. The annual cost of paying panel members to attend a third panel each month is £19,034.40.

1 x Chair = £500
1 x Vice Chair = £350
4 x Independents - £184.05 x 4 = £736.20
Total per panel £1,586.20
<b>Total for 12 panels: £19,034.40</b>

### **Recruitment and Assessment Team**

26. Regionally, Assessment Social Workers generally carry a caseload of around six assessment cases each in order to progress them as effectively and quickly as possible.
27. There are currently 4 FTE Social Workers in the Recruitment and Assessment team, each carrying a caseload of around 10 cases. The increase in enquiries means that this caseload is likely to increase. It is therefore proposed that 2 FTE Social Worker (Band B) posts are established in the Recruitment & Assessment team in order to meet demand.
28. In order to bring the new recruitment and assessment Social Workers up to speed as quickly as possible, and therefore ensure the most effective assessment process, there will be additional cost for specialist training of approximately **£7,000**.
29. The Recruitment and Assessment Team has no dedicated business support to conduct statutory checks on potential foster carers such as health assessments and references. The team relies on support from the fieldwork teams' Business Support Administrators.
30. The increase in assessment activity has resulted in more statutory checks than can be absorbed into the existing business support establishment, resulting in statutory checks not being consistently completed and followed-up within appropriate timeframes, which results in delay in getting assessments ready for panel.

31. It is therefore proposed that 1 FTE Business Support Administrator (NJE Grade 3) post is established to support recruitment and assessment administration. This post and budget will be established in the Chief Executive's department.
32. All assessments must to be reviewed and signed off by the Recruitment and Assessment Team Manager before going to panel. This is already a time-consuming and highly responsible function, and as assessments are going to increase it is imperative that all assessments are completed in full before submission to the Team Manager – if there are omission or errors the assessment is returned to the responsible Social Worker to complete, and then the updated assessment has to be reviewed again by the Team Manager.
33. In order to address this and ensure that assessments are right first time, it is proposed that 1 FTE Advanced Practitioner (Band C) post is established to support the preparation of assessments and provide support and coaching to assessment Social Workers.

### **Supervising Social Workers**

34. As more foster carers are recruited the more Supervising Social Workers will be needed to supervise and manage them. A safe caseload is considered to be no more than 15 foster carers, so it is anticipated that a further 3 FTE Supervising Social Worker (Band B) posts will need to be established. These roles will be recruited to as they are needed, from April 2022.

### **Marketing costs - Fostering campaign planning for 2021-22**

35. The Marketing communications objective is to increase marketing activity in order to amplify the number of quality enquiries received by the Fostering Service. This is a competitive market and it is important that the Council significantly increases its presence. It will achieve this via an integrated multi-channel approach including digital, radio, print and virtual events. Key deliverables will include:
  - a comprehensive, wide-reaching campaign that is always on, while still delivering focussed activity during peak periods such as Foster Care Fortnight. This will be supported by targeted activity to reach caring professions e.g. childcare, education, volunteering
  - the prioritisation of online digital spend as a fundamental part of campaign activity, as this provides trackable data and has the most proven results in past campaigns
  - promoting fostering as a viable option at a time of reflection about lifestyle and increased flexibility around working.
36. There will be a mix of both free and paid-for marketing to support the fostering campaign. The estimated cost of the increased marketing spend is **£58,500**.
37. The costs of establishing the additional posts to deliver the stretch target is £0.219m in 2021/22 and £0.138m in 2022/23. The other running costs are £0.085m in 2021/22. The three Supervising Social Worker posts will be recruited from April 2022 to manage the

forecast caseload increase. This will be funded through reinvesting £0.441m in cashable benefits from the reduction in the weekly cost of foster placements.

38. In conclusion, by growing the fostering service and putting it at the core of placement provision for children looked after:
- more children and young people who are looked after in Nottinghamshire will have an opportunity to be placed in a loving family environment
  - the Council will develop a reputation as an exemplar of fostering provision, offering an attractive fostering package which will compete favourably with that offered by other fostering agencies and reduce the risk of the Council's carers leaving
  - demand will be reduced for more costly placement types, and this will ease pressure on declining budgets.

### **Other Options Considered**

39. The service could continue to work with the existing staffing establishment and training, panel provision and marketing offer. This would however result in a bottleneck formed in the assessment process and potential foster carers would have to wait a long time to complete their assessment and be seen at panel. Some of these potential carers would go elsewhere where they could be assessed quickly, or would change their minds about becoming a foster carer altogether. This would also create delay in the pipeline and foster placements would not become available as early as possible – this would result in children and young people being placed in external foster agencies at greater cost to the placements budget, or temporarily in residential provision which could have a negative impact on the child or young person, as well as costing significantly more.

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

40. Looked after children numbers are increasing, as is the complexity of need.
41. External provision is increasingly expensive as increased demand drives up prices. This places pressure on the Council's placements budget.
42. Although a mixed economy of placements is good for placement choice, it is preferable to place children in placements which are controlled by the Council, as these are generally in-county and, it is felt that they provide better outcomes for looked after children.
43. The number and quality of enquiries to become a foster carer at Nottinghamshire County Council are much improved and are forecast to continue this improvement, and as a result the recruitment, assessment and supervision functions are under-staffed to manage the increased workload.

### **Statutory and Policy Implications**

44. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty,

safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

## Data Protection and Information Governance

45. A summary Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) has been completed and a full DPIA is not required.

## Financial Implications

46. The financial implications of the resources requested in this report are as follows:

Item	2021-22	2022-23
	£	£
2 FTE Social Workers (Hay Band B)	91,778	
3 FTE Supervising Social Workers (Hay Band B)		137,667
1 FTE Advanced Practitioner (Hay Band C)	52,206	
1 FTE Panel Administrator (NJE Grade 3)	24,452	
0.5 FTE Panel Manager (Hay Band C)	26,103	
1 Business Support Administrator (NJE Grade 3)	24,452	
Panel costs for an additional panel per month	19,034	
Specialist assessment training costs	7,000	
Increased marketing budget	58,500	
<b>Total</b>	<b>303,525</b>	<b>137,667</b>

47. There is an existing saving attached to this project for 2021/22 and 2022/23 reflected in the Council's MTFS of £0.283m and £0.357m respectively. The original profile of the savings has been updated to take into account the additional costs in **paragraph 46** together with the ambition to over deliver on the original target of 50 foster carers which will deliver additional cashable benefits. These additional costs will be funded through reinvesting £0.441m in additional cashable benefits, from the reduction in the weekly cost of foster placements, and should therefore have a net nil effect.

## Human Resources Implications

48. The human resources implications are set out in **paragraphs 16-34**.

## Public Sector Equality Duty implications

49. This proposal does not have a disproportionate impact on people with protected characteristics.



## Implications for Service Users

50. The proposed changes will result in a Fostering Service which is flexible, outcome-focused and put the child/young person at the centre of all decision-making.
51. There will be a positive impact on children who are currently or would otherwise have been placed with independent fostering agencies or in residential care when their needs could be met by the Fostering Service.
52. Foster carers and the children and young people they look after will be better supported, and fewer foster placements will break down.

## RECOMMENDATION/S

That Committee approves:

- 1) the proposal to further develop and grow the Nottinghamshire County Council Fostering Service, as detailed in **paragraphs 4-34**
  - 2) the establishment of the following posts in the Fostering Service from April 2021:
    - 2 FTE Social Workers (Hay Band B)
    - 1 FTE Advanced Practitioner (Hay Band C)
    - 1 FTE Panel Administrator (NJE Grade 3)
    - 1 FTE Business Support Assistant (NJE Grade 3)
    - 0.5 FTE Fostering Panel Manager (Hay Band C).
- and the establishment of the following posts from April 2022:
- 3 FTE Supervising Social Workers (Hay Band B).
- 3) the management and population of an additional fostering panel each month (bringing the total to three) as detailed in **paragraphs 16-25**
  - 4) an increase in spend on marketing activity in order to amplify the number of quality enquiries received by the Fostering Service as detailed in **paragraphs 35 & 36**
  - 5) purchase of assessment training for Social Workers in order to complete assessments as quickly and effectively as possible as detailed in **paragraph 28.**

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### **Constitutional Comments (AK 22/12/20)**

53. This report falls within the remit of Children and Young People's Committee by virtue of its terms of reference.

### **Financial Comments (SAS 31/12/20)**

54. The cost of the new posts in 2021/22 is £0.219m and £0.085m for additional panel costs, marketing and training, giving £0.304m in total. The cost of the new posts in 2022/23 is £0.138m.
55. There is an existing saving attached to this project for 2021/22 and 2022/23 reflected in the Council's MTFS of £0.283m and £0.357m respectively. The original profile of the savings has been updated to take into account the additional costs in **paragraph 46** together with the ambition to over deliver on the original target of 50 foster carers which will deliver additional cashable benefits. These additional costs will be funded through reinvesting £0.441m in additional cashable benefits, from the reduction in the weekly cost of foster placements, and should therefore have a net nil effect.
56. The Fostering Project delivery is reported via the monthly project monitoring. There is a risk that if the number of Foster Carers are not recruited in line with the projected profile this will impact on the Children & Families budget and reported by the usual monthly budget monitoring process.
57. The Fostering Service budget is £10.7m.

### **HR Comments (BC 22/12/20)**

58. The staffing implications are contained within the body of the report. Posts will be recruited to in line with the vacancy control and recruitment procedures.

### **Background Papers and Published Documents**

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

[Development of the Fostering Service – report to Children and Young People's Committee on 11th February 2019](#)

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

All.

C1425