

**13 June 2016****Agenda Item: 9****REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE****FOSTERING SERVICE: ANNUAL REPORT APRIL 2015 TO MARCH 2016****Purpose of the Report**

1. This report provides information on the activity and performance of the fostering service from April 2015 to March 2016.

**Information and Advice**

2. Nottinghamshire saw a rapid increase in the number of children in care during the period of 2008 and 2013. The number of children in the Council's care rose from 455 children to 901 (April 2013). This created a significant demand, in a relatively short period of time, for placements for these children. The Council needs to be able to place more children in its internal fostering service and has set a target of increasing its internal fostering capacity by recruiting 160 new foster carers over a three year period (2014-17).
3. The number of children in the Council's care has stabilised within the range of 841 (April 2014) to 851 (March 2015) to 839 (March 2016). Of the 839 children in the Council's care, 620 are placed in foster care (73.9% compared with 74.7% at the end of March 2015). Of these 620 children, 207 (33.4%) are placed with an independent foster provider (compared with 214 at the end of March 2015) and 413 (66.6%) are placed with a foster carer approved by Nottinghamshire (compared with 422 (66%) at the end of March 2015).
4. Of the 839 children in the Council's care, 413 are placed with a foster carer approved by Nottinghamshire. This equates to 49.23% of the total looked after population. The internal fostering service is the Council's highest provider of placements at the lowest cost. At the end of March 2016, the weekly cost of fostering in the internal service was £496 compared with the weekly cost of an independent fostering placement which is £816.
5. There are continued, positive indicators of reduced reliance upon higher cost independent fostering provision. The number of children placed with an independent fostering provider has reduced from 282 (April 2013) to 238 (April 2014) to 214 (March 2015) to 207 (March 2016). However, the number of children placed in external residential provision has fluctuated from 89 (April 2013) to 81 (April 2014) to 67 (March 2015) to 79 (March 2016). The number of children placed with a foster carer approved by Nottinghamshire increased in 2014/15 from 380 (60%) of all children in foster care to 422 (66%) in March 2015 and has remained stable at 66.6% (March 2016).

6. There have been a number of initiatives which have contributed to this outcome. There has been a proactive and sustained advertising and marketing approach resulting but there has been slight reduction in information requests to the fostering recruitment team. Of the information requests received, 232 requested an initial assessment of which 106 resulted in completion (a drop-out rate of 46%) and progression to the full fostering assessment.
7. 52 foster households were approved in 2015/16 compared with 66 in 2014/15 and 65 in 2013/14. The Council terminated the approval of 2 foster households in 2015/6 and 7 foster households submitted their resignation- a total loss of 9 foster households (compared with a loss of 26 households in 2014/15). The resultant net gain to the Council in 2015/16 was 43 households compared with 40 in 2014/15.
8. The recruitment and retention of foster carers is the core activity within the fostering service. The performance in 2015/16 is indicative of very positive retention activity but less positive recruitment activity. The latter is attributable to a number of different factors. These are budgetary restrictions and the closure of fee paid fostering schemes (fostering futures and contract care) - fee paid fostering roles have historically attracted a high number of information requests; the targeted recruitment of foster carers for older children and sibling groups restricting the pool of potential prospective foster carers for assessment.
9. In April 2014, the fostering service introduced a new fee paid fostering scheme to attract foster carers for children aged 11 years plus. It was anticipated that this would attract appropriately skilled and experienced people to foster an older child and funding was made available for 9 new foster households. This new scheme attracted 3 new foster carer approvals in 2014/15 and the scheme had grown to 7 foster households as at the end of March 2016. This indicates the challenges involved in attracting foster carers for an older child - even when competitive fees are attached. Growth is steady but slow and not commensurate to the demand.
10. A new initiative, in November 2015, to recruit foster carers for refugee children was successful in approving 6 foster households. These foster carers were recruited specifically in response to the crisis faced by unaccompanied Syrian children. The Government has yet to make a decision in respect of the United Kingdom's response to unaccompanied children from Syria and, consequently, these foster carers have been caring for unaccompanied children from other countries.
11. An important factor in supporting the sufficiency of internal fostering provision is the way in which the Council retains and develops its existing foster carers. The Council terminated the approval of 2 foster households in 2015/16 and 7 foster households submitted their resignation - a total loss of 9 foster households compared with 26 foster households in 2014/15, 36 in 2013/14 and 10 in 2012/13. The primary reason for terminating foster carer approval was for safeguarding reasons and the primary reason cited on notices of resignation was age related change in circumstances.
12. In April 2016, there were 330 approved foster carers (236 mainstream; 25 home from home/contract care; 37 support carers; 32 family and friends). In April 2016, 23 of the 236 mainstream foster homes had vacancies, that is, a vacancy rate of 9% compared

with a vacancy rate of 24% in April 2015. This suggests that internal fostering capacity has been maximised and is at near capacity.

13. The fostering service has strengthened its support strategy to foster carers and children who foster. A Sons and Daughters Council has now been established and a third annual event took place in October 2015. It is anticipated that this celebration event will take place on an annual basis as part of the children who foster strategy. The contribution of the foster carers' birth children to the outcomes for a fostered child has long been appreciated and recognised.
14. The fostering service has a good reputation in respect of the support it provides to its foster carers. This is evidenced by a very low level of complaint from foster carers and by the level of foster carer retention. The support strategy has continued to be enhanced by engaging foster carers in service developments. Foster carers have been involved in recruitment activity, media interviews and a group of foster carers have attended consultation forums regarding activity within the transformation programme. The joint team meeting initiative (between foster carers and supervising social workers) was introduced in January 2014 and has continued to be very successful and well received. The fostering service continues to support its foster carers in their professional development and professional identity through a varied programme of learning, training and developmental opportunities. A long service and achievement event for foster carers was held in March 2016.
15. The fostering service is a service for children. A changed approach to long term family finding for children in the care system has continued to have had mixed results. The profiles of children, who wait for a long term foster family, have been featured on the online learning and information portal for foster carers and in communications with the foster carer community but the response has been very low. The children who wait strategy will continue in 2016/17 - particularly targeting the needs of young people currently living in residential care.
16. A proposal to reshape the fostering service was considered by the Divisional Leadership Team in June 2014. Subsequently, it was decided to cease expansion of therapeutic fostering (fostering futures); expand provision of long term placements for disabled children (contract care, which was subsequently withdrawn as an initiative); establish an independent review service for foster carer reviews and continue with the establishment of a specialist team for foster carers who are connected to the child they look after (family and friends). Subsequently, further areas of transformational activity were identified within the Transformation Programme for 2015/16 - the allowances/fees that are payable to foster carers and the structure of the fostering service. The fostering service has delivered on both of these areas. A new fostering payment process was introduced in April 2016 and a new structure is to be implemented in May 2016. Both of these activities have required a significant amount of activity from staff and foster carers. It is testament to the commitment, dedication and hard work of staff and foster carers that the core business activity has been sustained alongside the additional demands of implementing change. There is a tension in seeking to provide increased internal fostering provision alongside making savings but efficiency measures and changed ways of working continue to be proactively considered.

17. It has been a challenging year for the fostering service. On-going change is indicated and it is crucial that the many strengths of the service are not diluted. The fostering service has approved 117 households in the two previous financial years and is on target to achieve the transformational approval target of 160 foster households. The performance of the fostering service was acknowledged by Ofsted in its inspection of the Council's safeguarding and care services in 2015, as being "impressive".

### **Other Options Considered**

18. This report is for information only.

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

19. It is recommended that the contents of this report are noted.

### **Statutory and Policy Implications**

20. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (Public Health only), 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.

### **RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 1) That the information on the activity and performance of the fostering service from April 2015 to March 2016 be noted.

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### **Constitutional Comments**

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

### **Financial Comments (SS 02/06/16)**

22. 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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