

9 December 2013

Agenda Item: 6

**REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE
FOSTERING SERVICE: BUSINESS ACTIVITY REPORT**

Purpose of the Report

1. This report provides an overview of the business activity currently being undertaken within the fostering service.

Information and Advice

Service Demand

2. There are 894 looked after children in Nottinghamshire, of which 715 are in a foster care placement. Most (61%) are cared for by Nottinghamshire County Council's fostering families, with the other 39% placed with the independent fostering sector.
3. The average cost of a placement with a Nottinghamshire County Council carer is £447, compared with £802 for an independent sector placement. Given the budget pressures within the authority, the Improvement Programme identified the fostering service as an area in which financial savings could be found by investing in additional marketing and recruitment activity and implementing changed ways of working. An improvement plan is in place and positive indicators of change and growth are being evidenced.

Placement activity

4. Over the last nine months, the number of children in care has stabilised at around 900, 56 fewer than were forecast. This is primarily due to more children exiting the care system by returning to their birth families, being cared for by an extended family member through a Special Guardianship Order/ Residence Order, or becoming adopted.
5. Over this period there has been a 9% increase in the number of children placed with internal foster carers (from 402 to 439). This increase has led to a reduction in the use of higher cost external fostering and residential placements. This indicates that good progress is being made in reducing the authority's placement costs.

Recruitment of new foster carers

6. The fostering service has been set the target of recruiting a net increase of 15 new foster households and 10 additional fee paid foster carers each year to 2017. If achieved, this would provide a minimum of 50 additional internal foster placements per year. The fostering service has a dedicated and committed workforce who, together with the foster carer community, is intent on achieving significant growth. Local foster homes for local children has, and will continue to be, a key motivating factor in the achievement of the targets which have been set.
7. To support the recruitment of more foster carers, an additional five social work posts have been invested in the fostering service. Together with a changed foster carer assessment process, as introduced by the Government in July 2013, the objective is to progress foster carer applications within six months. Five additional social workers came into post in July and November to meet the increased demand for foster carer assessments and to implement a quicker assessment process from January 2014.
8. There are encouraging signs of growth in recruitment activity during this financial year:
 - there has been an 8% increase in the number of enquiries to foster
 - this has led to a 4.5% increase in the number of visits being requested from people interested in becoming a foster carer
 - 12 new foster households have been approved since April 2013 and a further 16 new foster households are expected to be approved by December 2013.
9. More foster carers are forecast to be recruited than last year due to changed ways of working and new and innovative approaches to marketing activity. This has included a street lamp banner and bus stop campaign across Nottinghamshire, inviting people to consider becoming a foster carer/adoptive parent; a refreshed fostering website (approximately 50% of all enquiries come through the website and this is growing); a partnership with the Customer Service Centre to extend the hours in which someone can make an enquiry to foster; and more information being available for carers wishing to transfer from independent fostering agencies
10. The number of relative/child specific (family and friends) assessments has also increased by 49% compared to the same period in the previous year. As a result, 72 relative/child specific placements were made to the end of September compared to 49 in 2012-13.

Retention of existing foster carers

11. The retention of foster carers is also a key area of activity for the fostering service. The fostering service has 290 approved foster households for children

who are not known to the foster carer at the time of placement and 45 foster households for disabled children in need of the short break service.

12. The fostering service's performance in retaining its foster carers is better than the average performance of other local authorities across England, and this is attributed to the good levels of support, learning and development that are provided. There is a strong culture of foster carer engagement and participation in service improvements. Many of the service improvements (claiming for travel expenses and identity cards are two examples) have been foster carer led initiatives. It is an inevitable consequence, for a service which retains its foster carers for 30 or 40 years post approval, that it also loses its foster carers to retirement. In the period April to October 2013, foster carer approval has been terminated for 16 foster households.

Other Options Considered

13. This report is for noting only.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

14. This report is for noting only.

Statutory and Policy Implications

15. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, the public sector equality duty, human resources, crime and disorder, human rights, the safeguarding of children, sustainability and the environment and those using the service and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the overview of the business activity currently being undertaken within the fostering service be noted.

Steve Edwards
Service Director, Children's Social Care

For any enquiries about this report please contact:

Jayne Austin
Fostering Service Manager
T: 0115 9774154
E: jayne.austin@nottsc.gov.uk

Constitutional Comments

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

Financial Comments (KLA 13/11/13)

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

Background Papers and Published Documents

None.

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.
C0320