



SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL

People Services

Children & Families

Fostering Service

Annual Report

**Sheffield Fostering Service
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1 Purpose of Report

1.1 This is the Annual Report of Sheffield City Council's Fostering Service. The report details the activity and performance of Sheffield's Fostering Service for 2017/18 and sets out improvement and development work planned for 2018/19.

2 Introduction:

2.1 Sheffield City Council Fostering Service's remit is to provide family based placements for Sheffield's looked after children. The Service recruits and approves prospective foster carers, matches and places children with approved foster carers, and provides support and supervision to approved foster carers.

2.2 It is a legislative requirement that the Fostering Service reports on its activity and performance to Elected Members.

2.3 As at the end of 2017/18, the Fostering Service had 264 mainstream approved foster carers offering a range of short term task centred placements, permanence placements, short break placements for disabled children, and support/respite placements. In addition, the service had a further 4 approved 'connected persons' foster carers. Connected persons foster carers are family members or friends of a looked after child or children who have been placed with them. Childcare legislation requires that these carers, who are most often grandparents to the looked after child, be assessed and approved, where suitable, as local authority foster carers.

2.4 Our foster carers do a fantastic job offering care to some of the City's most vulnerable children and young people, very often transforming their lives.

3 Our Vision and Aims

3.1 Our City's big ambition is that every child, young person and family achieves their full potential. Sheffield's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2018-2020 sets out how we are going to meet that ambition for our looked after children and care leavers. We are determined to ensure our children and young people in care, adopted children and care leavers succeed.

3.2 Our vision is that 'children and young people are safe and supported to achieve their full potential'. We set out four elements to how we will work to achieve this, as follows:

- Children are at the centre of our practice
- We intervene at the earliest opportunity
- Our workforce are skilled and supported to do the work that they need to
- Children and families benefit from high performing and high quality services

3.3 The Fostering Service supports the department's policy to enable children and young people to stay with their birth families wherever this is safe and possible and where they cannot, to place them without delay with alternative carers.

3.4 The aim of Sheffield's Fostering Service is to provide high quality foster care as part of a full range of accommodation provision for looked after children and provide the best possible standards of care, safety and protection for children who cannot live with their own families. In doing so the service strives to:

- Provide a service that is welcoming, accessible and inclusive
- Provide a choice of high quality foster placements to meet the individual needs of children and young people
- Ensure foster carers provide a good level of parenting to all children in foster care and assist children and young people to engage in their care and placement planning
- Work together with partner agencies to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people, to enhance and develop health, education & well-being
- Work with foster carers to support 'staying put' placements for children remaining post 18
- Provide support and assessments for family and friends of foster carers

4 Looked After Children Placement Data

4.1 Sheffield's looked after children population on 31st March 2018 totalled 628 children and young people. This is an increase of 43 children compared to the 585 children who were looked after on 31st March 2017. As we moved into 2018/19 this number continued to increase.

4.2 As the number of looked after children in Sheffield has increased; the number of Sheffield's approved mainstream foster carers has decreased. At the end of 2017, we had 307 approved mainstream foster carers. By the 31st March 2018 this had reduced by 43 to 264. To some extent this reflects the picture nationally, where there has been an overall decrease in the number of approved fostering households and it is well recognised that there is a national shortage.

4.3 Sheffield does not have a sufficient number and range of in-house foster carers to meet the needs of our looked after children. This means that we have to place children in independent fostering agency placements. These are always more expensive and very often out of city. In some cases, where we cannot identify an in-house foster carer or an independent fostering agency placement, a young person may have to be placed in a children's home. This may be in contrast to the child's needs for a family and again will be very expensive and may be out of city.

4.4 As of 31st March 2018 we had 474 looked after children placed in foster families. Of these 320 of them were placed with Sheffield's in-house foster carers. Of the 320, 254 were placed with mainstream foster carers previously unknown to the child, and a further 66 were placed with connected persons foster carers. Making up the remainder of the 474 children placed in foster carer were 154 who were in independent fostering agencies placements.

4.5 We aim to place as many of our looked after children in our in-house fostering placements as possible. As such it is essential that we have access to a sufficient number and range of high quality, local foster carers, and efforts will be focussed on reversing the declining numbers in 2018/19 and beyond.

4.6 It is acknowledged that a major weakness in the service has been the timely completion of connected person's assessments. Action is being taken in 2018/19 to address this.

5 Recruitment Activity and Outcomes in 2017/18:

5.1 As discussed above, there is currently a significant shortage of foster carers in Sheffield and the numbers have been decreasing rather than increasing. The number of mainstream Sheffield City Council foster carers has reduced from 307 in 2014 to 264 at the end of 2017/18.

5.2 Recruitment and retention of foster carers is probably the most important factor for any fostering organisation in delivering an effective fostering service to looked after children. Sheffield is therefore making significant changes to our 'Foster Care Offer'.

5.3 In 2017/18 the service recruited and approved 15 new mainstream foster carer households. However there were 18 resignations, disappointingly resulting in a net loss of 3 carer households. This compares with a net gain of 1 carer household in 2016/17 when we recruiting 16 new households and lost 15.

5.4 In 2016/17 we had 297 initial enquiries about fostering, received 63 requests for initial home visits and made 16 new carer approvals. In 2017/2018 we had a significant increase in enquiries to 633 and 108 referrals for initial home visits. The

increase in interest came in the second part of the financial year due to the new marketing campaign.

5.5 Therefore it is likely that some new carer approvals following this interest will be completed in 2018/2019.

5.6 We can already see that recruitment outcomes will improve in 2018/2019. The service is currently projecting up to 40 new mainstream carer approvals in 2018/19, more the double the number for 2017/18.

6 Recruitment Plans for 2018/19:

6.1 A full and detailed Recruitment and Retention Strategy for 2018/19 has being produced based upon the channels and target audiences agreed with the Councils' Communications and Marketing Team. Recruitment events have been timetabled throughout the year, focussing on three specific campaigns. These are in May for Fostering Fortnight, October to launch a different campaign focussing on images of our foster carers and January 2019 when we will be focussing of foster carer stories.

6.2 In addition we have ensured that we remain visible across the city, having banners up in all local parks, advertising on the back of public transport and also attendance at key events across the city including park runs, Owls in the Park and Tramlines.

6.3 The service ensures we have high visibility on Facebook/Twitter updating our posts 2-3 times per week and we hold regular (6 weekly) open evenings.

7 Support and Supervision Services for Carers:

7.1 All carers are allocated a fostering social worker who undertakes their assessment; where possible for consistency they will remain allocated until their first placement is made. Another fostering social worker will be allocated post approval/first placement, who will continue to support and supervise the foster carer post approval; there may be a short period of handover/dual allocation.

7.2 All carers are offered a mentor for the first 12 months post approval to offer additional support and guidance. Consideration is given to the mentor carer's

approval category and location of carer so support can be more practical if necessary.

7.3 All carers will be visited a minimum of every 6 weeks. Many will be visited far more frequently, depending on their circumstances.

7.4 During office hours we have a duty service available to carers and outside working hours we have a foster carer's telephone helpline.

7.5 The Service has a contact and liaison officer, who makes monthly calls to carers to 'check in' and promote any upcoming events, such as the Open Forum, Fostering Fun Day, Bag a Book event that are fostering events open to all foster carers.

7.6 The Service holds quarterly Foster Carer Forums, and has a closed secure webpage where carers can book onto training and access any policies and procedures and be updated on any service developments.

7.7 There are also a number of foster carer support groups across the city that take place on monthly basis and this includes the introduction of a new support group specifically for newly approved carers.

8 Fostering Panel:

8.1 Between 1st April 2017 and 31st March 2018 a total of 15 panels meetings were held. There were 3 panels meetings that were cancelled due to lack of business. There currently is capacity to hold 2 panels per month dependent on service need and where necessary additional panels can be arranged. The Service has two different panels with different membership. Each panel has an independent chair with significant knowledge and experience of fostering issues and all panels meetings have been quorate which reflects the excellent commitment of the panel members.

8.2 There continues to be a system of each panel having a dedicated professional panel advisor. This is well established and continues to work well and provide consistency within and across panels. The panel advisor was initially a part time post however this post was made full-time in September 2017 in order to support the recruitment drive of foster carers and to reduce any issues of capacity or delay linked to panel. Both panels have the same Chair and Vice-Chair, enabling the panel to remain consistent in its leadership and in the recommendations they make. The Vice-Chair assumes the chairing role four times per year in order to develop and maintain their chairing skills.

8.3 Regarding quality assurance role of panel, all panel members have an individual responsibility to raise 'practice issues' as a contribution to quality assuring the work undertaken by the Fostering Service. This ranges from typing and factual errors to practice/performance issues of individual workers or feedback to the Service at a

more senior level in relation to how procedures and policies are being implemented. These issues are reported back to the service predominately via the Panel Adviser, but also directly from the Panel Chair and Vice Chair to the Agency Decision Maker via business meetings. Panel members contributed to a working group which developed the assessment report and this has seen benefits as the assessment reports are consistently of good quality. Challenging the performance and practice of the Fostering Service is seen as an essential role of panel.

8.4 Business Meetings are held twice per year and these are an effective means of communication between the Fostering Panel and the Service.

8.5 All panel members are reviewed annually in relation to their performance as panel members. Reviews take place throughout the year to coincide with members appointments. The panel member reviews are instrumental in establishing the training needs for panel members that will inform the 2018/19 training programme.

8.6 In addition to the annual fostering panel training day, all new panel members are provided with reading material and research articles that are relevant and useful to the matters presented to Fostering Panel.

8.7 All new panel members have an induction which consists of a welcome pack, the opportunity to observe panel, and a mentor who is an experienced panel member.

8.8 Panels held each month in 2017/18:

Fostering Panels held each month

April 2017- 2 cancelled	0
May 2017 – 1 cancelled	1
June 2017	1
July 2017	2
August 2017	1
September 2017	2
October 2017	1
November 2017	1
December 2017	1
January 2018	1
February 2018	2
March 2018	3

8.9 Agency Decision Maker

From April 2017 – March 2018 the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) has been the Assistant Director, Provider Services. During this period there have been three changes of Assistant Director. The ADM is a nominated person within the Local Authority who has the legal responsibility to make an approval decision. The ADM's role is to consider the fostering panel's recommendation and to make the final decision. In most circumstances the ADM accepts the fostering panel's recommendation; the Panel Advisor offers advice and support to enable this

process. The ADM for Fostering was changed in March 2018 and is now Paul Dempsey, Assistant Director, Provider Services.

8.10 Foster Carer Approvals:

There were 15 new approvals of mainstream foster carers between April 2017 and March 2018.

The table below shows the number of foster carer households and the number of approved beds offered by those households in total, at the end of 2016/17 and 2017/18. From this we can see that although the number of fostering households has reduced, the number of placements offered within these families actually increased by 1. This indicates that in 2017/18 compared to 2016/17 more of our foster carers were offering multiple placements.

Date	No. Foster Families	No. Approved Beds
31.3.17	264	282
31.3.18	247	283

8.11 Resignations:

Historically we have not as a Service been as pro-active as we could in understanding why foster carers choose to resign. We now ensure as part of our exit process that the panel advisor contacts all foster carers who choose to resign and offer them a face to face exit interview to better understand the reasons and rationale for their decision. It is hoped that this more consistent approach will give the Service a good understanding of a foster carer's experience and also give the Service opportunities to make necessary changes and development.

8.12 Annual Reviews:

It is a legislative requirement that all carer reviews where it is the first review post initial approval are presented to the Fostering Panel for consideration. There were 9 first annual reviews presented at panel in 2017/18. However it is acknowledged that there were 15 approvals the previous year (2016/2017) and so there should have been more first approvals at panel in the year.

8.13 The Service has recognised that first reviews have not always been presented to panel in a timely manner and action is being taken to address this. All new carers are being booked into panel for their first review at the point they are initially approved. It is anticipated that this will contribute to increased compliance around meeting timescales and ensure that all annual reviews are completed within 12 months and presented back to panel.

8.14 Last year we continued to meet with our colleagues in the reviewing service to establish and consolidate good communication and to help us identify what the

barriers to compliance were. These were primarily due to capacity and sickness cover of staff. Both issues are being addressed.

9 Developments in 2017/18:

9.1 As previously stated as part of the fostering business case, the panel advisors role has increased from 0.5 to a full time post. This is for a 2 year period to be reviewed. The purpose of this is to be able to increase the number of panel meetings in anticipation of increased recruitment outcomes and our target to recruit at least 40 new foster carers per year.

9.2 The Service has recruited a psychologist within the Service, to support with vulnerable placements, offer consultations to foster carers and social workers and develop a consistent training model to be delivered to the foster carers and staff within the service.

9.3 An additional social work post in the recruitment team has been established in order to meet planned increased demand and ensure timely allocation of assessments.

9.4 In October 2017 we launched our new fostering marketing campaign and logo 'Foster Sheffield's Future'. We have increased our investment on marketing and have become more visible across the city, which has led to increased interest.

9.5 Staying Put: The Staying Put policy has been further developed and this has included the recruitment of a Staying Put and Supported Lodgings Co-ordinator who will lead on the policy and support carers and young people from aged 16 when future options are being considered.

10 Developments and Improvement Actions for 2018/19:

10.1 The Service has the following development aims for 2018/19:

- Improve looked after children's outcomes through improving the sufficiency of care placements and developing an expanded and improved quality fostering service

- Create a pool of foster carers able to be part of a No Wrong Door type service provision and link with children's homes as a step down alternative to residential care
- Increase recruitment of new foster carers
- Improve retention of existing foster carers
- Maintain placement stability outcomes for looked after children
- Improve emotional wellbeing of looked after children in foster care
- Improve educational engagement and progress
- Increase the number and percentage of young people placed in foster care (as opposed to residential care) and in in city placements(as opposed to out of city) in line with best practice and children's bests interests – and as a result reduce spend on unnecessary high cost placements
- Improve our financial offer and our practical support offer to foster carers

10.2 The Fostering Service will be going through a change in structure in 2018/19 and as part of this we will be developing 3 new teams in addition to the two supervisory and support worker teams. These will be the Placement Team, the Recruitment Team and the Connected Persons Team. As part of the development of the dedicated Connected Person's Team we will ensure that we have a clear policy and robust tracking to ensure timescales for connected person's assessments are met.

10.3 We will also be establishing an additional full time fostering reviewing officer post to ensure all carers receive timely, face to face annual reviews. There will be a quality assurance element to this role to ensure that changes in practice and necessary actions and improvements are implemented.

10.4 In addition to this consideration is being given to the development of different fostering schemes including the introduction of the 'No Wrong Door' type provision in Sheffield. This is a model of provision where foster carers link with 'residential hubs' where either re-unification to family or move onto foster carer would be the plan for the young people in placement. The idea is that foster carers spend time working in the residential to hub to build relationships with the young people, with a view to being matched to one of them for a foster placement.

11 Summary:

11.1 The numbers of Looked After Children has continued to increase and evidence the continued and increased need for more foster carers. Unfortunately without the resource young people are being placed in independent agency fostering placements or in residential placements which may not meet the needs of the young person or their care plan.

11.2 Over the past 12 months there has been a small net loss in carer numbers. This is extremely disappointing however in September 2017 the fostering brand was re-launched and we have seen a significant improvement in interest since then and have ensured that we remain visible across the city with our branding.

11.3 The need for an increase in foster carers has been recognised and supported by the Corporate Parenting Board and wider council and we have been fortunate enough to be granted some additional funding from the fostering business case which has allowed us to invest more money in the service. This has included additional staff members, a psychologist and additional support in the service. This has allowed us to improve our support offer to our carers.

11.4 We have increased our targets for 2018/2019 to approving **40** more fostering households which would be an increase of over 50% compared to 2017/2018. Forecasting forward based on the increased interest and work allocated it is anticipated that this target will be achieved.

11.5 In addition it is anticipated that the new structure in the service, which has created a dedicated recruitment team, leaves us much better placed to improve recruitment outcomes, with the newly established specialist connected persons team focussing on the different type of assessment and support that connected persons foster carers need.

Stephanie Kerr
Fostering Service Manager
July 2018

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