

Meeting:	Cabinet
Meeting date:	20 October 2016
Title of report:	Annual fostering report – April 2015-2016
Report by:	Cabinet member young people and children's wellbeing

Classification

Open

Key Decision

This is not a key decision.

Wards Affected

Countywide

Purpose

To review fostering service performance and approve related documents.

Recommendation(s)

THAT:

- (a) the activity, quality and impact of Herefordshire Council's fostering service as detailed in appendix A to this report be reviewed and any additional actions to support improvement identified;**
- (b) the Herefordshire foster carers charter (appendix B) be approved;**
- (c) the guide for young people that are looked after (appendix C) be approved; and**
- (d) the statement of purpose (appendix D) be approved.**

Alternative options

1. As this is a performance report there are no alternative options.

Reasons for recommendations

2. It is a statutory responsibility for Cabinet to receive an annual fostering report and approve the related documents. It also provides an oversight of the direction and priorities for Herefordshire's children and ensures they receive good quality care from the county's foster carers, who are supported to keep children safe, enjoy a healthy lifestyle and attain good educational outcomes.

Key considerations

3. The annual report outlines the changes in team structure, recruitment and placement activity between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2016 and evidences that the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service is effective and efficient.
4. As reported last year, there continues to be a national shortage of foster carers, specifically those able to look after children from traumatised backgrounds and with challenging behaviours.
5. In line with the children with disabilities (CWD) transformation programme, it was identified that more family carers for short breaks for disabled children would be needed and these are now being recruited and matched to children.
6. To prevent the use of expensive mother and baby units, we have identified a need to recruit carers able to meet the needs of parent and child placements. In addition, carers for older teens continue to be an area of need.
7. To meet sufficiency needs, we have increased overall foster carer households by 15% from 93 carers on 31 March 2015 to 107 carers on 31 March 2016. Of these, eight carers are Herefordshire Intensive Placement Support Service foster carers providing specialist therapeutic support to the most challenging young people. To meet the needs of teens, we have maintained supported lodgings provision at 18 households.
8. Over the year, there have been seven foster carers transferring to Herefordshire from independent fostering agencies (IFA) or other local councils, which means they are transferring in with existing skills and expertise for these type of challenging placements. There have been no in-house carers transferring out to agencies; with support and training being identified as positive factors in being a Herefordshire foster carer.
9. Two Herefordshire carers received an MBE this year in recognition of their long standing commitment to looked after children and over 30 years of fostering service.
10. Positive permanence outcomes for children are reflected in the number of approved kinship carers and children moving from fostering into special guardianship order (SGO) arrangements. Herefordshire family and friends foster carers have increased by 6.25% (32 to 34 households) and seven children moved from being looked after (LAC) to SGO. There are a total of 84 children in SGO arrangements. This reduces social work intervention and ensures compliance with legislation. Post order visits will be from one special guardianship social worker three times a year, rather than six weekly statutory visits from children's social workers and additional visits from the fostering service.

11. Following implementation of a recruitment strategy and successful open day event in January 2016, four specialist foster carer assessments began and a further four overnight short breaks providers were also identified to meet the needs of children with disabilities and their families. Across the service this raised awareness of the needs of disabled children, increasing training and support available resulting in two further in-house carers converting to provide short-breaks for disabled children who are looked after.
12. Mother and baby placements have been made in-house over the year with continued referrals reflecting demand forecast for 2016/17. These avoid high cost IFA or residential unit costs (£585 against £1,200 - £2,500 per week).
13. By the end of March 2017, our aim is to increase the number of overnight short breaks carers from four to eight households, which will provide breaks for potentially 10 to 12 children, depending on the number of nights each child is assessed as needing.
14. With the introduction of the availability of the adoption support fund to special guardians, it is hoped that more children will move into special guardianship arrangements and permanence over the next year.
15. We aim to increase the number of foster carers and supported lodgings providers to meet the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC), as part of the national transfer scheme. The target is to have six additional places by December 2016 and a further six by March 2017. This is being supported through the development of training courses and policies and procedures for UASC placements.
16. Training and policies for mother and baby placements is planned to improve provision and skills for an additional two to three mother and baby placements.

Community impact

17. It is a council priority to safeguard children by ensuring they have a safe place to live. The fostering service, carers charter and looked after children's guide support the council achieving its ambitions in key strategies in the corporate plan, health and wellbeing strategy and children and young people's plan to keep children close to their existing networks.
18. Increasing in-house capacity will support children being placed with local carers, enabling them to remain in their current school and facilitate contact with family members. This will also meet objectives set above and within the children and young people's plan.

Equality duty

19. The fostering service welcomes enquiries from all ethnic, religious and cultural groups within Herefordshire. Increased in-house fostering capacity will support sufficiency of choice and ensure appropriate matching of children to the right placements, with consideration to ethnicity, culture, religion and disability.
20. To prepare and support foster carers who are being recruited and caring for unaccompanied asylum seeking children specialist training has been arranged and will be further developed during the next 12 months.
21. Under Section 149, the "General Duty" on public authorities is set out:

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
Carol Moreton – fostering team manager on Tel (01432 383240)

- a. As a public authority we pay due regard to ensure where possible that we;
- b. eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by or under this Act;
- c. advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- d. foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it as we carry out our functions.

Financial implications

22. The Fostering Service has a budget of £3,488k for 2016/17. In addition to this a budget of £3,491k is available to fund the HIPSS service, independent fostering agency and residential placements. Due to the high number of looked after children there has not been sufficient in-house capacity despite the growth of the fostering service and there is currently a forecasted overspend of £133k for 2016/17.
23. Fostering allowances may increase in line with Department for Education (DfE) guidance to ensure that the council stays in line with national guidelines. This decision is delegated to the director for children's wellbeing. In recognition of the valuable role foster carers play in supporting vulnerable children they are paid a fee relevant to their skill and experience in addition to allowances and this enables the service to be more competitive with the independent fostering sector.

Legal implications

24. Herefordshire Council must comply with Standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards and ensure that every three months a report on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service is received by the executive to allow them to monitor the service for effectiveness and ensure it is achieving good outcomes for children. They must also be satisfied that the provider is complying with the conditions of registration.

Risk management

25. Other than when it is safer to do so, without an effective fostering service, children who need to be looked after by the council may be placed away from their own community. This can cause disruption to their education and disaffection from their families and friends.
26. If recruitment targets are not met, there is a risk of increased dependence on private agencies and residential units located further away from a child's networks incurring higher costs and budget pressures.
27. Currently we do not have sufficient families able to care for children with complex disabilities, Muslim or eastern European families. This may require specialist placements to be arranged out of county. We aim to mitigate these risks through specific support plans, training, using buddying or learning from those carers with children from other countries and cultures.

Consultees

28. The fostering service works closely with the participation service and corporate parenting panel, which consists of council members and representatives of partner agencies in health, education and representative foster carers and young people leaving care, which is a forum for young people to be consulted on their experience of care. This has resulted in a strengthening of the foster carers association and fundraising arm, which will provide additional funding for activities and trips for birth children and care leavers, for example, which no longer are budgeted for within fostering expenditure.

Appendices

Appendix A - Fostering annual report 2015/16

Appendix B - The foster carer's charter

Appendix C - The young people's guide

Appendix D - Statement of purpose

Background papers

- None identified.