

THE FUTURE SHAPE OF ADOPTION AND FOSTERING SERVICES IN HEREFORDSHIRE

Report By: Children's Services Manager (Resources)

Wards Affected

Countywide.

Purpose

1. To update Members on the Action Plan resulting from the Best Value Review of Adoption and Fostering Services in Herefordshire.

Financial Implications

2. None identified.

Background

3. Stage One of the Best Value Review of the Herefordshire Adoption and Fostering Services was completed in September 2003 and reported to the Committee on 29th September in that year. The plan at that time was to complete a process of consultation over the following three months that would result in a clear view of the current qualities and future shape of these services. In October 2003, it was announced that an Inspection of the Herefordshire Fostering Service by the National Care Standards Commission was to take place. This cut across the Best Value process and entailed a great deal of staff time being diverted to the preparatory work.
4. As a consequence, the Committee was informed in April 2004 that the timescale for the Best Value Review Action Plan and the Action Plan resulting from the Inspection were to be brought together. As referred to in the previous report on this agenda the final inspection report has yet to be published, although a draft has been received. The outcome is a broadly positive assessment of our current services. Taken alongside the Annual Report of the Herefordshire Adoption Service, presented to this Committee in November 2003, we now have the information available to consider the future shape of both the Fostering and Adoption Services.

Consultation questions

5. The Best Value Review identified six key questions for consideration and consultation. These are attached as Appendix 1, along with the response gleaned by an extensive information gathering and analysis process undertaken by the Inspectors and also in consultation with looked after children and other key stakeholders.

Implications for future development - Adoption

6. The Herefordshire Adoption Service will continue to provide a service to prepare and train relatively small numbers of local people as adoptive parents, whether for children of UK origin or overseas adoption. For reasons of confidentiality and occasionally safety, few local children will be placed with Herefordshire adopters.
7. Family finding for children placed for Adoption will continue to be the responsibility of specialist staff, liaising closely with social workers responsible for the children concerned. The search and placements will be sourced nationally from local authority and voluntary sector adoption agencies. The Herefordshire Adoption agency will continue to operate an Adoption Panel, as it has done since 2001 when the joint arrangement with Worcestershire was ended.
8. The Adoption Support Service is developing in response to new legislation and guidance and will continue to represent a mix of directly provided services, some linked to family support, and services commissioned and run on our behalf by reputable voluntary organisations. Independently provided services to birth parents will be a priority for commissioning, with the possibility of collaboration with neighbouring authorities. The means for ensuring that Adoption Allowances are considered within a recognised framework and paid in appropriate circumstances, will form a priority for the Adoption Service with a new approach to be piloted shortly.

Implications for future development - Fostering

9. The overall number of places provided by the Herefordshire Fostering Service is sufficient to meet the bulk of local need in an effective and cost efficient way. This is linked to the need to continue to reduce numbers of looked after children, which are not sustainable at current levels. There remains a real challenge to ensure flexibility to meet fluctuations in levels of need (both numbers and type). The added value of a locally based directly provided service is the ability to continue to draw on people who foster primarily as a form of service to the community. Well trained and supported both by skilled staff and adequate allowances, the local fostering workforce can be sustained and developed to meet changing needs. The requirement for additional strategic development time within the management structure is identified as a matter for further consideration.
10. Increasingly the training and support of foster carers will be sourced on a multi-agency basis, enhanced by the recent appointment of a Training and Workforce Development Advisor for Children's Services. The simplification of the payment structure for foster carers is a priority. Enhancing life-chances for looked after children is essential and the appointment of a full-time specialist Health Visitor for this group will assist the process.
11. There are specific needs to address the ageing profile affecting foster carers (and social work staff). By concentrating on the core business of the service, we will be able to review payment structures, consider employment of some foster carers on a contract basis and address resources for older challenging young people. Here, an inter-agency commitment to collaborative commissioning to provide local community based care for children with complex needs will be tested to the full.
12. Future shape and developments in the fostering service need to be seen alongside services offered by the independent sector. Placements purchased from private sector fostering agencies will continue to have a role in absorbing some of the

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
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pressures that hit the Fostering Service. Discussions about discounts for purchase of multiple places from a single provider have already commenced. Further consideration of the best means to access good quality residential provision at a reasonable price, locally if possible, for those children who cannot be safely contained within a foster family will also be explored.

13. Other developments will be influenced by the emerging agenda for service integration in response to the green paper consultation, "Every Child Matters" and the Children Bill currently progressing through Parliament. Whilst these will affect the overall context of service provision, it is not anticipated that there will be any direct impact on the Adoption or Fostering Services in the short term.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the contents of the report be noted and the overall approach of enhancing the quality of existing directly provided services, whilst considering opportunities for collaborative commissioning to ensure a flexible and creative approach to meeting the needs of looked after children, be endorsed.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Best Value Review of Herefordshire Adoption and Fostering Services – Update report to Scrutiny Committee, April 2004.
- Best Value Review of Herefordshire Adoption and Fostering Services, Stage One report to Scrutiny Committee, September 2003.