

Meeting:	Cabinet
Meeting date:	21 January 2016
Title of report:	Annual fostering report – April 2014-2015
Report by:	Fostering team manager

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. It is open to Cabinet to identify further actions to address and under performance or drive improvement but in doing so regard must be had to the availability of resources.
2. There are no alternatives to adopting the Herefordshire foster carers’ charter and guide for young people looked after because they have been drawn up following

engagement and consultation with Herefordshire foster carers and looked after children to shape the service they needed from Herefordshire Council.

Reasons for recommendations

3. It is a statutory responsibility for Cabinet to receive an annual fostering report, and approve the related documents to have oversight of the direction and priorities for Herefordshire children and ensure they receive good quality care from Herefordshire foster carers who are supported to keep children safe, enjoy a healthy lifestyle and attain good educational outcomes. The foster carer's charter evidences the participation and engagement of foster carers in helping to improve outcomes for children. It provides clarity around expectations and communication about concerns between Herefordshire fostering service to enable carers to look after complex children. The process stimulated foster carer representative roles and subsequently the setting up of a foster carers association. Increased communication and increased fundraising activity results in more support for children, carers and birth children of foster families.

Key considerations

4. The management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service is monitored through routine performance reporting processes to ensure oversight of the service and effective improvements are maintained with risks identified and mitigated.
5. Herefordshire fostering service was judged by Ofsted in 2013 as 'achieving good outcomes' for children and rated adequate overall. As part of the children's services inspection in May 2014 there was no 'stand-alone' judgement but assessment from inspectors was that the fostering service was providing a good service to looked after children.
6. The annual report reflects the changes in team structure, recruitment and placement activity between 1 April 2014 – 31 March 2015. Since this time the fostering service has developed a specialist therapeutic service for children with complex needs and has reduced the number of children being placed outside of the county in residential units and external agencies. From July 2015 marketing and recruitment has resulted in an increase in people enquiring and progressing to becoming foster carers from December 2015.
7. Nationally there is a shortage of foster carers, specifically those able to care for children from traumatised backgrounds and with challenging behaviours. There has also been an increase in the number of children needing to be looked after and those needing to be placed within 15 miles of their home environment. To date Herefordshire has been able to meet the needs of younger children under the age of 10 years, including sibling groups, and also has a good record for preventing placement disruption. However, there are increased costs associated with not being able to place older teenagers or challenging placements through using external resources. Locally, Herefordshire needs foster carers able to provide teenage placements, permanence and therapeutic placements to prevent the use of expensive external placements. To meet the increased need for specialised services and increase sufficiency the fostering service has separated into two distinct service areas: the general fostering team and the kinship and SGO hub. This has resulted in faster assessment procedures and increased support to extended family members able to offer children permanent homes without dependency on in-house resources. This means in-house resources are more available to those children who cannot be

placed within the extended family. Through the implementation of the care placement strategy it has also developed the HIPSS (Herefordshire Intensive Support Services) scheme to provide local therapeutic foster placements for those young people either currently in, or at risk of, going to residential or external fostering agencies.

8. The general fostering team is responsible for all short, long term and respite placements (0-18yrs), and supported lodgings providers (16-18 years), HIPSS foster carers (Herefordshire Intensive Placement Support Services) and implements a 'staying put' arrangement for those over 18 who wish to remain with their foster carers until ready for independence. The kinship and special guardianship order (SGO) hub supports families who are able to care on a permanent basis for members of their extended family or connected persons.
9. As at 31 March 2015 the fostering service provides support, supervision and training for 92 fostering households, 21 supported lodgings providers and 32 kinship foster carers. In total there were 124 fostering households at 31 March 2015. As at 31 December 2015 there will be 140 fostering households. There are also 97 children who have achieved permanence through SGO arrangements in Herefordshire.
10. Analysis of recruitment strategies and data on enquiries showed interest peaks and troughs around key seasonal times of the year, Fostering Network publicity on TV, supermarket and high town events. Developing the council website and social media underpins a marketing and recruitment strategy for 2015-16 with the appointment of a marketing officer and recruitment officer to enable us to meet increased targets in recruiting more foster carers. Training and support programmes to carers have been increased to reflect those carers seeking varied training and development. (appendix a, b and d)
11. In performing regulatory duties all foster carer annual reviews have taken place within timescale in the last 12 months. Of 124 carer households two unannounced visits fell out of timescale (1.6%); one due to bereavement/new worker allocation and one due to reassessment and serious concern procedures. (Appendix A, page 6)
12. Additional investment and staffing within the fostering service mean that the recruitment targets for approved foster carers has been significantly increased to help prevent spend on independent fostering agencies and residential costs for the year 2015-16 By increasing the number of in house carers we will be able to reduce spend on more expensive IFA's, keep children local to their birth families, schools and social workers. By increasing in house recruitment and using the resources/carers we have more creatively (increasing placements and support to carers) has meant that a number of experienced carers have moved over to become carers for Herefordshire Council (7 in the 12 months January to December 2015) which means they are more able to take older or challenging placements more quickly than those recruited without previous experience needing induction periods and time to develop skills. The care placement strategy and development of the HIPSS scheme means that by December 2015 we also have seven specialist therapeutic carers. Of these, two placements have 'stepped down' from residential units and four have been either prevented from being placed in residential care or been maintained in placement without further placement disruption. Every placement disruption has significant impact on a child's wellbeing and likely need for more intensive resources in the future from across the council. Therefore these figures present great success for these young people both in the here and now and into the future.

Community impact

13. It is a council priority to safeguard children by ensuring they have a safe place to live. Through placements in loving and supportive foster families research tells us children will be happier, healthier and are more likely to achieve in education and future employment. 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 well-being and children's and young people's plan.
14. Increasing in house capacity will support children being placed with local carers. This will enable children to remain in their current school and facilitate contact with family members. This will also meet objectives set within the care placement strategy and children and young people plan.

Equality duty

15. The fostering service welcomes enquiries from all ethnic, religious and cultural groups within Herefordshire. Increase 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. Currently we do not have sufficient families able to care for children with complex disabilities, Muslim or Eastern European families. This risks requiring specialist placements out of county. At present we aim to mitigate these risks through specific support plans, training, using buddying or learning from those carers with children from other cultures..Note: Under Section 149, the "General Duty" on public authorities is set out thus:
 16. "A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to -
 - eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct ... prohibited by or under this Act;
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it."

Financial implications

17. The fostering service overspent by £326,536 April 2014/15 as a result of the previous baseline budget not being adjusted sufficiently to allow for the impact of a significant national increase in children requiring foster placements, an increase fostering households and also increase Level 2 and 3 carers available for sibling or more challenging placements to mitigate costs of dependency on IFAs for these placements. These in house placements are still more cost effective than using IFA placements – an average in house placement costing £350 pwk including mileage (£520 with staffing costs in 2013) compared with an average £824 pwk for an IFA and £3,500 for residential placement (December 2015). Whilst the 15/16 budget was increased by £139,279 an overspend is anticipated given continued increase in placements and care placement strategy to reduce IFA costs through increased staffing in marketing and recruitment activity and social work staff to support an projected increase in foster carers (target of 31 this year),11 gross to date with a further 16 forecast for the next quarter. Further pace is required to maintain targets ie

through fast track of IFA carers transferring to in house.

18. April 2015 in house lac figures stood at 175, an increase was experienced in July 2015, October figures are 209. Work is being undertaken 'at the front door' to prevent children becoming LAC; this current increase also represents a reduction in dependency on IFA placements through in-house provision.
19. Fostering allowances are increased by 1% every April to bring the local authority in line with nationally set guidance. As Lac numbers increase this figure increases.
20. There have been an average of four staying put arrangements per month over the last 12 months. These cost on average £300 per week (£1,200 per month) but are offset against the Department for Education funding of £52,000 to support young people post 18 years. There is a shortfall of £5,600 if the numbers of staying Put remain the same, however, there is likely to be an incremental increase as known kinship and in house placements are forecasted to increase by 6 placements in the next six Months (from Jan 2016). Recruitment needs to increase to compensate for these 'blocked placements'. Work around reviewing Staying put allowances and securing LHA benefits needs to be implemented to offset costs.

Legal implications

21. The Local Authority must comply with Standard 25.7 of the Fostering National Minimum Standards and ensure that annual reports on the state of the fostering service are received by the executive.

Risk management

22. Without an effective fostering service children may be placed at risk within their community. This would be detrimental to their wellbeing and life chances and would not support the objective of 'protecting children and giving them a great start in life' or listening to the wishes and feelings of children to be kept safe, be healthy and to achieve in education and into adulthood. An effective fostering service is of importance to ensure that we are able to offer a robust approach
23. The fostering service has consistently been judged adequate or good by Ofsted. If the service is not effective this affects the overall judgement of children's wellbeing and thus the reputation of the council. We need to ensure that the service maintains this judgement and minimise any reputational risk.

Consultees

Foster carers at the Foster carers Forum 2013 shaped the foster carers charter within participation groups and feedback via the foster carer representatives which continues to meet with the team manager on a monthly basis to shape expectations of the fostering service to support and equip them to undertake the task of caring for children with complex needs. Further work needs to be undertaken to ensure young people's views are being sought in relation to their care experience and aims of the care placement strategy.

Reporting is shared with members of Herefordshire's fostering panel which is independently chaired and comprises independent and professional members with experience of fostering. This may raise issues of note to the agency decision maker regarding performance of the service and needs of looked after children. Key concerns

have related to the number of changes of social workers children experience which links to the recruitment and retention strategy of the council.

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 are a forum for young people to be consulted on 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 2014/15

Appendix B - The foster carer's charter

Appendix C - The young people's guide

Appendix D – Statement of purpose.

Background papers

- None identified.