

Meeting:	Cabinet
Meeting date:	Thursday 24 October 2019
Title of report:	Fostering and Adoption Service Annual Reports 2018/19
Report by:	Cabinet member children and families

Classification

Open

Decision type

Non-key

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose and summary

To review Adoption and Fostering Services performance and approve related documents.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- (a) the performance of the adoption service as outlined at appendix 1 to this report be reviewed, any risks to achievement of objectives noted and relevant mitigating actions approved; and**
- (b) the performance of the fostering service as outlined at appendix 2 to this report be reviewed, any risks to achievement of objectives noted and relevant mitigating actions approved.**

Alternative options

1. No alternatives. Under the National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2014 and Fostering 2011 (NMS), Cabinet should receive updates on the management, outcomes and financial state of Herefordshire Council's adoption and fostering services; it is open to Cabinet to identify additional or alternative actions to improve performance, but in doing so regard must be had to the resource implications of additional actions.

Key considerations

2. The annual reports set out the activity and performance for the Adoption Service and Fostering Service during 2018-19.
3. The Adoption Service is responsible for recruiting, assessing, training and supporting adopters; matching children with adopters who can meet their needs and supporting those affected by adoption either as a child, adopter or birth family of an adopted child.
4. Key achievements for the service include:
 - a. 56% of our children being placed with their adoptive family within 14 months of being accommodated, we are performing better than 8 of our statistical neighbours
 - b. 7% of children aged 5 years and over leaving care who are adopted for 2015-18 compared to a national average of 5%
 - c. 22% of children leaving care being adopted in comparison with an England average of 14%.
 - d. The OFSTED inspection in June 2018 identified several areas of good practice in Herefordshire's adoption service including timeliness of adoption decisions, matching decisions and post adoption support.
 - e. Agreement for Herefordshire joining Adoption Central England (ACE) and being on target to achieve this by 1st July 2019.
5. Improvement plans for 2019/20 focus upon successful integration with ACE and continued reduction in time to place children for adoption.
6. The Fostering Service is responsible for recruiting, assessing, training and supporting local authority foster carers to provide a home for children and young people who are looked after. Children become looked after because their parents have been assessed as unable to meet the needs of their children, in most cases due to abuse or neglect.
7. Key achievements for the service include:
 - Restructure of the service to improve recruitment and retention.
 - Increase in fostering enquiries
 - Higher number of carers seeking Special Guardianship arrangements
 - Increase in Staying Put arrangements
 - Broadening of training programme
8. Key priorities for development during 2018-19 were:
 - Increase in number of carers approved
 - Increase in number of available beds with current cohort of carers
 - Improve retention through improving benefits package available to foster carers

- Increase in children achieving permanency in special guardianship arrangements
- Increase placement stability
- Increase in support for Special Guardianship Orders
- Development of training programme – therapeutic parenting and online resources
- Mosaic workflow upgrade completion

Community impact

9. It is a council priority to “keep children and young people safe and give them a great start in life”. The fostering and adoption services support the council in achieving its ambitions in key strategies in the corporate plan, health and wellbeing strategy and children and young people’s plan.
10. Adoption provides a permanency option for looked after children and so where it is in the child’s best interests enables children to become part of a family outside of the looked after system. Ensuring every looked after child achieves permanency is a key part of the Corporate Parenting strategy with adoption a key element of this.
11. Fostering provides a safe and secure home for looked after children enabling them to recover from trauma and supporting them to reach their potential. Providing sufficient local carers able to meet these needs is a key priority within the Corporate Parenting strategy.

Equality duty

12. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the ‘general duty’ on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to -

- (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
13. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying ‘due regard’ in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. The adoption and fostering services welcome applications from all sectors of the community and is ambitious in seeking placements for children whatever their level of need.

Resource implications

14. For 2018/19 the adoption service budget was £773k. At outturn the service had an underspend of £104k due to a combination of staffing vacancies, reduction in spend on adoption allowances and adoption panel expenses.
15. The adoption service generated income of £103k from selling placements to other local authorities and spent a total of £160.5k on purchasing adoptive placements resulting in a

net cost to the authority of £57.5k. It is anticipated that this budget pressure will reduce when the service joins ACE as a greater choice of adoptive placements will be available across the ACE region to enable matching of children.

16. The fostering service had a budget of £4,719k with an outturn position of being overspent by £246k. This relates to the need to provide more in-house placements than was budgeted for. This does mean that it would have cost more in external placements if we had not used in-house placements as we are required to provide placements for each of our looked after children. The increased spend on placements was off-set to some extent by underspends on staffing due to vacancies during the year.
17. The external fostering budget which is used to fund independent fostering agency, residential placements and the Herefordshire Intensive Placement Support Service (HIPSS) had a budget of £5,408k with an overspend of £1,936k. This budget is under pressure due to the very high numbers of looked after children in the service resulting in there being insufficient placements available in house. The service continues to work hard at recruiting carers and in reducing the number of children who are placed in residential care.

Legal implications

18. The National Minimum Standards are issued by the Secretary of State under the Care Standards Act 2000 and detail the conduct and standards required for Adoption and Fostering Services and as such are taken into account during inspections by Ofsted.
19. Standards state that the executive side of the local authority:
 - a. receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency
 - b. monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users;
 - c. satisfies itself that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration; and
 - d. the executive formally approves the statement of purpose and reviews them at least annually.

Risk management

20. Without an effective adoption service, looked after children would spend longer in the care of the local council. This would be detrimental to their wellbeing and life chances. If the support needs of adoptive families are not met, children may return to the care system. An effective adoption and looked after children's service is important to ensure that we are able to offer a robust and timely approach to securing permanence for children unable to be brought up safely within their own families and to ensure access to services that will best support their individual needs.
21. 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 relationships with their families and friends.
22. If recruitment targets are not met, there is a risk of increased dependence on independent agencies and residential units located further away from a child's networks incurring higher costs and budget pressures.

Consultees

23. Chairs of the Adoption and Fostering panels have been consulted and had the opportunity to contribute to the annual reports.
24. The children and young people scrutiny committee received the annual update on 15 July 2019 and made no recommendations to the Executive.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Adoption Service annual report 2018-19

Appendix 2 – Fostering Service annual report 2018-19

Background papers

None identified