

Title of report: Fostering Service Update

Meeting:	Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee
Title of report:	Fostering Service Annual Report April 2020-March 2021
Meeting date:	Tuesday 22 February 2022
Report By:	Dana Marrett, Service Manager for Fostering and Permanence Service

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

This Fostering Annual Report provides an overview of the function, operation and performance of Herefordshire Council's Fostering Services during the period from April 2020 to March 2021. Content includes information on services provided to children and Foster Carers; data and analysis regarding how our Foster Carers are recruited and supported [including training and development] to meet the assessed needs of children and young people. It also includes details of planned improvements which evidence our commitment to a journey of continuous improvement.

Recommendation(s)

That the Committee:

- a) Review the performance of the Fostering Service as outlined in the Annual Report at Appendix A; and**
- b) Note any risks to the successful achievement of objectives noted and approve relevant mitigating actions.**

Alternative options

1. Fostering services are regulated and Inspected by Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills]. The Fostering Service is subject to the Fostering Service (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. Together, they form the basis of the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 (CSA) for the conduct of fostering services and must be effected.
2. It is open to the children and young people scrutiny committee to identify additional or alternative actions to improve performance, but in doing so regard must be given to the resource implications of additional actions.

Key Considerations

3. The Fostering Annual Report sets out the activity and performance of the Fostering Service during the period April 2020 to March 2021.
4. The report is presented considerably later in the year than the Committee would expect and the service apologises to the Committee for the delay, caused in part by changes in personnel during the period 1 April 2021 – 30 September 2021. The report for the current year (2021/2022) will be produced for sign off by the Directorate Leadership Team by 30 June 2022 and presented to the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee at the earliest possible opportunity thereafter.
5. The Fostering Service is subject to the Fostering Service (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. Together, they form the basis of the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 (CSA) for the conduct of fostering services and must be effected.
6. The Fostering Service is responsible for recruiting, assessing and training council 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 resulting in trauma.
7. Key achievements for the service include:
 - Increasing the number of children placed with in-house foster carers
 - Increasing the number of children leaving care for permanency via Special Guardianship Order (SGO)
 - Increasing the number of staying put arrangements
 - Maintaining the service to meet needs and support foster carers during Covid-19
 - Providing virtual and online training, face to face visits to carers
 - Holding virtual foster panels twice a month
8. Key priorities for improvement during 2021/2022 are:
 - Recruitment – recruit to vacant social work posts, foster panel advisor and marketing officer

- Increase the number of children who are long-term matched with their foster carers
- Continue to increase the number of children placed in SGO placements.
- Continue to increase the number of in-house foster carers.
- Support Team manager and social workers to improve practice/performance
- Develop a marketing and recruitment strategy
- Review and update the foster care register to ensure its up to date and accurate
- Review and define key performance targets.
- Work jointly with performance team to secure resources to update Mosaic (data management system)

Community impact

9. The Fostering Service is committed to meeting the council's corporate plans and priorities, including achieving the ambitions of the corporate parenting strategy and the improvement plan.
10. Increasing the number of Herefordshire in-house foster carers to look after our children ensures that the children remain in their local area close to family/ friends and community networks
11. Creating local employment opportunities for local people through fostering.
12. Through fostering, children looked after are provided with a safe and secure home environment, this enables them to recover from trauma and supports them in reaching their full potential.
13. Increasing staying put arrangements ensures that young people leaving care will remain in the local area with their current carers with whom they have developed a meaningful and lasting relationship. This also promotes and supports continued education, training and employment.

Equality duty

14. Please state how does this decision / proposal pay due regards to our public sector equality duty as set out below [do not remove the wording in the note, from section 149, below]

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.

- 15. 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 fostering service recognises and values equality, difference and diversity, welcoming applications from all sectors of the community. It is committed to identifying individually assessed needs and seeking placements where children's needs will be met and their outcomes will be improved.
- 16. The fostering service will focus on increasing the diversity of approved foster carers and foster panel members. The service is focussing upon increasing the number of children and young people placed with connected carers and special guardianship carers so that children and young people are able to live with family members/friends who share the same culture, ethnicity, background and identity.
- 17. All foster carers complete mandatory diversity training to ensure that they understand diversity and difference with a positive perspective. It is important that all children and young people are supported to develop a positive sense of identity.

Resource implications

- 18. For the period 2020/2021 the fostering service had a budget of £4,664,073 with an outturn position of being underspent by £274,257. The underspend is due to staff vacancies of 103k and 171k is due to placements being externally funded instead of in-house.
- 19. 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 £7,682,252 with an overspend of £5,268,859. This is due to the 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 foster carers and reducing the number of children who are placed in residential care.

Legal implications

- 20. Section 22G of the Children Act 1989 stipulates the general duty of local authority to secure sufficient accommodation for looked after children.
- 21. (1) It is the general duty of a local authority to take steps that secure, so far as reasonably practicable, the outcome in subsection (2).
- 22. (2)The outcome is that the local authority are able to provide the children mentioned in subsection (3) with accommodation that—
 - (a) is within the authority's area; and
 - (b) meets the needs of those children.

23. (3) The children referred to in subsection (2) are those -
- (a) that the local authority are looking after,
 - (b) in respect of whom the authority are unable to make arrangements under section 22C(2), and
 - (c) whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the authority's area.
24. (4) In taking steps to secure the outcome in subsection (2), the local authority must have regard to the benefit of having –
- a) a number of accommodation providers in their area that is, in their opinion, sufficient to secure that outcome; and
 - b) a range of accommodation in their area capable of meeting different needs that is, in their opinion, sufficient to secure that outcome.
25. In this section “accommodation providers” means –
- a) local authority foster parents; and children's homes in respect of which a person is registered under Part 2 of the Care Standards Act 2000.]
26. A review of the performance of the fostering service can only benefit the local authority and service users to ensure it is providing the best possible service to meet the required standards and its duties.

Risk management

27. If we do not have a fully functioning effective fostering service, our looked after children may be placed away from their own community. This can cause disruption to their education and relationships with their families and friends. It can also result in children and young people being subjected to further trauma.
28. If we do not meet our recruitment targets, there is a risk of increased dependence on independent fostering agencies and residential placements which are located further away from a child's community. Such placements also incur higher costs and budget pressures.
29. If the service is not adequately resourced, it will negatively impact on performance. Poor performance will affect the outcomes for children and the support provided to carers. This could also have a negative impact on staff retention. If the service's performance is not at the expected standard, this will incur a poor judgement when the service is inspected by Ofsted.
30. An effective fostering service is important to ensure that our children looked after are placed locally. This will prevent disruption to their education and they will be able to maintain links with their networks.

Consultees

31. The report will be presented to the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee for ratification before it is submitted to cabinet for their approval.

Appendices

Appendix A – Fostering Service annual report 2020-21

Background papers

None identified

Report Reviewers Used for appraising this report:

Please note this section must be completed before the report can be published		
Governance	Joanna Morley	Date 10/02/2022
Finance	Louise Devlin	Date 02/02/2022
Legal	Kim Gaffrey	Date 03/02/2022
Communications	Luenne Featherstone	Date 01/02/2022
Equality Duty	Carol Trachonitis	Date 01/02/2022
Procurement	Mark Cage, Procurement Manager	Date 01/02/2022
Risk	Chris Jones, Directorate Hub Manager	Date 01/02/2022
Approved by	Darryl Freeman	Date 14/02/2022