

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

6TH JUNE 2012

SUBJECT:	FOSTERING SERVICE REPORT
WARD/S AFFECTED:	ALL
REPORT OF:	ACTING DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES
KEY DECISION?	NO

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of developments and performance in Wirral's fostering service in accordance with the requirements of the Fostering Regulations and Guidance 2011 National Minimum Fostering Standards.
- 1.2 The fostering service provides quality foster care for children who need to be looked after in public care; this is at a much lower cost than other regulated children's placements.
- 1.3 Local Authorities must ensure that they are able to provide sufficient foster care placements for those children who need family based care in accordance with the relevant Regulations and Standards governing such services.

2.0 BACKGROUND AND KEY ISSUES

- 2.1 The overall total number of foster carers approved by Wirral Council as of 31 March 2012 is 313 households and the total number of looked after children placed with Wirral foster carers is 541.
- 2.2 There are two key indicators for placement stability. It is important to recognise these indicators reflect placements for all children in care not just those placed in foster care. However, since the majority of looked after children are placed in foster care, these indicators strongly reflect performance in the fostering service. NI 62 is the percentage of children looked after at 31 March who have experienced three or more placements during the year and NI 63 is the percentage of looked after children aged under 16 at 31 March, who have been looked after continuously for at least 2.5 years and who have lived in the same placement for at least 2 years, or are placed for adoption and their adoptive placement together with their previous placement have lasted for at least 2 years. The targets set for the year for each of the indicators represents good performance nationally.

Performance Information 1st April 2010 to 31st March 2011

- 2.3 NI 62 was 8.9% or 61 children for this period.
- 2.4 NI 63 was 59.8% (159 children out of 266 children).

Performance Information 1st April 2011 - 31st March 2012

- 2.5 At the end of March 2012 the provisional figure is 11.3% for NI 62. This is above the target of 9% and reflects the need to improve placement choice by continuing efforts to recruit more foster carers. There has also been work to secure earlier intervention to support placements of teenagers at risk of disruption.
- 2.6 The percentage of children who have remained in placement for 2 years or more (NI 63) is expected to increase to the target for this year of 70%, as more foster carers are recruited from a wider pool that are more able to match the needs of children in care.

3.0 Recruitment of Foster Carers

- 3.1 A new 'Why Me, Why You' campaign was launched by the Council's Corporate marketing team in March 2011 to generate additional interest in fostering with the aim of recruiting a new group of foster carers. This involved the design of new promotional material, for use on the web page, on bus stops, in one stop shops, on the radio during foster care fortnight and advertising in the job section of the local paper. In order to meet the anticipated additional initial enquiries and to provide an efficient prompt service, all telephone calls were directed to the Council's call centre instead of directly to the Fostering Service. Newspaper advertising has continued through the winter period, including the Christmas period. This is to be continued through Spring and Summer. This provides for a steady stream of calls from people who are interested in fostering. Wirral has continued to be involved in the North West recruitment strategy, and advertising initiative.
- 3.2 The number of new foster carer households approved for the period April 2011 to 31 March 2012 is as follows:
 - 1 family link
 - 2 parent and child
 - 2 long term
 - 15 short term Band 1
 - 5 short term breaks
 - 17 connected person (family and friends)

This gives a total of 25 new general foster carers and 22 new fully assessed connected persons.

- 3.3 The number of foster carer households who will have received pre approval training April 2011 to March 2012 is 46 general prospective foster carer households. There are in addition 35 connected persons (family and friends) households which are largely directed through care proceedings.

- 3.4 A number of foster carers have ceased to foster during the period of April 2011 to March 2012, this is where the children either returned to their parents, or permanence was secured via Special Guardianship or adoption. In some instances the foster carers retired.
- 3.5 One carer was not approved following fostering panel, one was deregistered following removal of the child from his care, and one was deregistered on the grounds of suitability. One family left as their experience of fostering was not what they expected.
- 3.6 There are continued pressures for the fostering service to recruit sufficient foster carers to meet the needs of children in care.
- 3.7 Wherever possible family and friends are always considered as potential carers for children known to them and viability assessments (to provide an initial assessment of their suitability) are often undertaken in respect of a number of potential connected persons, on the instruction of the Court, when a child needs to be in the care of the local authority. This is putting additional pressure on the fostering service.
- 3.8 The foster care service is being maintained at a full staffing compliment of social workers and support workers.

4.0 Support for Foster Carers

- 4.1 A Foster Carer Partnership Group was set up in 2010, and includes foster carers, senior managers and staff from the fostering team. The Partnership Group meets every 2 months and considers any concerns from foster carers and has helped to develop new policies and procedures and improve practice. The group has been influential in the development of the peer mentoring scheme.
- 4.2 Foster carers are encouraged to develop their skills through attendance at workshops and training provided by the fostering service and completion of the CWDC designed workbook. For the last 2 years a significant number of foster carers have completed NVQ level 3 in Health and Social Care (Children and Young People). Foster carers attend joint training with staff and briefings. There is a weekly drop in supported by supervising social workers, and young people are now involved in delivering foster care training.
- 4.3 In the last 6 months we have developed a peer mentoring scheme, this is where experienced foster carers support, guide and advise newly approved carers. We have 11 mentors who helped develop the scheme and attended a days training. They have assisted in the writing of the departmental policy for Peer mentors, which has now been agreed. Since April 2012 we have linked 5 Mentors with new carers at the time of their approval by the Agency decision maker. Mentors meet regularly with the service to feedback their experiences and from this learning the scheme is continuously developed. By having a mentor, newly approved carers will be encouraged and have confidence to attend training, and if necessary their mentor will attend training with them.

- 4.4 For the last two years the local authority has recognised the contribution of foster carers by holding an annual award ceremony with presentations by the Mayor of Wirral.

5.0 Fostering Panel

- 5.1 Following the resignation of the previous foster panel chair, in Autumn 2011, the post has now been filled, and the new post holder commences imminently. There is a temporary independent chair who is experienced in undertaking this role. The newly appointed chair has a clear job description which includes undertaking annual reviews of panel members and has responsibility for supporting the development of panel members. It is expected this will strengthen the fostering panel in meeting its duties. In addition recruitment of social workers is taking place in June 2012, to increase the central list of panel members. This will ensure that the panel can meet as often as required to respond to the demands of the service.
- 5.2 Recently feedback forms have been introduced to monitor the information being presented to the Fostering Panel. The Agency Advisor checks all information to be presented to Panel before it is distributed to Panel members, to ensure the quality of the reports is of a high standard. Fostering Panel complete feedback forms on each family report presented, as a further quality control measure, and to inform the Panel Chair's quarterly reports.

The experience of attendees to Panel is collated through every person attending Panel, including applicants, approved foster carers, supervising social workers, and social workers being asked to complete an anonymous feedback form to give their views of their experience of Fostering panel, and how they feel they were treated. This again provides information about what needs to change and provides information for the quarterly report. For example a comment last time was that drinks could be provided, and as a consequence drinks will be provided for families in the waiting area from next Panel.

6.0 Fostering Futures

- 6.1 This is a joint initiative between the Department and Cheshire and Wirral Partnership Trust (CAMHS). This provides specialist foster care to a number of young people who have had placement disruptions in the past and required a more structured approach to their care. The scheme is looking to recruit new carers and there is a marketing plan to support this. There are currently 6 foster carers who provide placement for Fostering Futures and 5 foster carers who provide placements for maintaining Futures. Placements are time limited, which is part of the design of the scheme, but it is acknowledged that young people need supported placements to move on to when they have completed the programme. This has in some cases involved the young person remaining with the same carer, but the carer transferring to a different scheme and level of support under 'Maintaining Futures'. During this period a complaint was received by Ofsted. This complaint was investigated and it concluded that there has been a particular issue over the introduction of the scheme 'Maintaining Futures', in relation to foster carers who have chosen to transfer to it from 'Fostering Futures'. As a result the service has improved communication and issued clearer guidance.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 It is important that Wirral Council has a fostering service that is able to recruit, prepare, assess and approve foster carers that meet the needs of children that are in the care of the local authority.
- 7.2 The service recognises that there are improvements needed in both the numbers of foster carers recruited and the recruitment of foster carers from diverse backgrounds. This is being addressed as an important element of the Sufficiency Plan.
- 7.3 The performance of the fostering service is managed by the Fostering Team Manager who monitors the progress from initial enquiry to approval of foster carers, the reviews of foster carers (including CRBs and medicals) and the case loads of the supervising social workers. The Fostering team manager also monitors the fortnightly payments of fostering allowances and the overall budget for the service.
- 7.4 A recent Internal Audit rated the fostering service as three stars (out of a possible 4 stars) in relation to approval of foster carers and application of payments to carers. The definition of 3 stars is 'There is a good system of control in operation that is performing well but opportunities exist to enhance the control environment further.' The recommendations from this audit were implemented immediately.

8.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 8.1 There are no proposals for consideration in this report, therefore there are no other options to consider.

9.0 CONSULTATION

- 9.1 The Fostering Service are currently administering a survey of foster carers and children in foster care on behalf of Ofsted. The survey is due to be completed on 30th May following which there will be feedback to the Service.

10.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

- 10.1 No implications in relation to this report.

11.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: FINANCIAL; IT; STAFFING; AND ASSETS

- 11.1 The budget for Fostering Services in 2011/12 was £7,661,800 and the spend for that period was £9,108,300. This includes the Fostering Team budget of £1,345,100 (including staffing of 21.3 FTEs) and a total allowances budget of £6,316,700. The overspend of £1,446,500 relates to the number of allowances paid during the year. At the end of 2011/12, 486 children received fostering allowances, 24 children were in agency fostering and 162 children received Special Guardianship or Residence Order allowances.

In 2012/13 the budget was increased to reflect the payment of the National Minimum Fostering Allowance and the payment of fees to connected carers. The overall budget is £7,984,600 and the projected spend is £9,353,254 (based on 486 children receiving foster care allowances and 163 children receiving special guardianship and residence order allowances). The budget is sufficient for 500 children. The number of children in foster care, receiving special guardianship or residence allowances exceeds this by 150. The Looked After Children Strategic Change Project has a clear plan to focus on reducing overall costs and the number of children in foster care.

12.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

12.1 None relevant to this report.

13.0 EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

13.1 Has the potential impact of your proposal(s) been reviewed with regard to equality?

An Equality Impact Assessment for Wirral's Permanency Policy was completed in February 2008. As this report has no recommendation for policy change there is no requirement for a new EIA.

14.0 CARBON REDUCTION IMPLICATIONS

14.1 There are no implications in relation to this report.

15.0 PLANNING AND COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

15.1 The Fostering Service ensures that children that are unable to live with their birth families are able to be looked after in a safe and supportive home environment which provides stability to children and young people and reduces the risk of anti-social behaviour.

16.0 RECOMMENDATION/S

That:

- 1) Elected members consider the information in the report and satisfy themselves that the service is being managed effectively and that there are good outcomes for the children and young people that are fostered.
- 2) The financial implications arising from the payments to connected carers are reported to Cabinet

17.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

17.1 The Fostering National Minimum Standard 25.7 requires the executive side of the local authority to:

- receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the service every 3 months,
- 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

REPORT AUTHOR: *Simon Garner*
Strategic Service Manager
 telephone: 0151 666 5575
 email: simongarner@wirral.gov.uk

APPENDICES

REFERENCE MATERIAL

Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance
The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011
Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards
Care Planning, Placement and Case review (England) Regulations 2010

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee	21 st January 2011 16 th November 2011
Cabinet	18 th March 2010
Cabinet	15 th April 2010