

## **Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

### **Wednesday, 27 February 2019**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>Wirral Fostering Service</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>Director for Children's Services</b>

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

The in-house fostering service recruits and supports carers and provides placements for children from across the borough. The purpose of this report is to provide an update for the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee in relation to Wirral's in-house fostering Service. Committee Members have identified the key lines of enquiry as follows:

1. Details of foster carer recruitment and retention
2. Training and support offered before and during placements
3. Levels of placement breakdowns and the reasons
4. Numbers of young people who remain in the 'staying put' scheme

This report sets out our current practice in the areas above and provides some further contextual information for consideration.

Wirral currently has 833 Children Looked After (CLA) as at 25th January 2019. These children are placed in a small number of different types of provision as follows:

- 623 (75%) in some form of foster placement (more than in similar authorities)
- 73 (9%) in residential placements (the same as similar authorities)
- 104 (12.5%) placed at home with their own parents (more than similar authorities)

The remainder are placed in a variety of other arrangements e.g. Residential Special Schools, mother and baby placements, independent living etc.

Foster placements for Wirral children looked after are sourced via a mixed economy model utilising both in-house and externally purchased placements. Of the 623 children in foster care a high proportion 511 (82%) are placed within our in-house fostering service. Wirral therefore has the second largest local authority fostering services in the North West region.

A key function of a fostering service is to recruit foster carers. Nationally fostering services are struggling to recruit enough carers to meet the demand for placements, with a small decrease year on year of the total number of registered carers. So far this year 18 mainstream foster carers have been recruited by Wirral; a further 8

assessments are likely to be presented to the Fostering Panel before the end of March giving a predicted total of 26 new fostering households this year, 3 more than last year. There has also been a change in the profile of carers being recruited with an increase in the number of kinship carer assessments taking place.

We have had some recruitment success and our overall numbers of fostering households has increased over a two year period from 305 to 315. Whilst 28 foster carers have left the service in the current year, the service numbers have been bolstered by an increase in the number of kinship foster carers.

Foster carers leave the service for a variety of reasons. Some have been deregistered by the service due to concerns about practice. In other cases, foster carers have resigned because they feel they have reached the end of their fostering career or because they have adopted the child in their care. In other cases, foster carers have decided to no longer foster as they are continuing to care for a previously fostered child under the auspices of a staying put arrangement. This is good practice but reduces the number of placements available.

The fostering service is continually looking for opportunities to better support carers with what can be a very challenging but important role. A range of support and development opportunities are offered to foster carers in Wirral. Each foster carer has an annual development plan that includes a mixture of mandatory and optional training covering a wide range of topics. Foster carers are supported via regular visits from their "Supervising Social Worker", in addition to the visits undertaken by the social worker for any child in placement. The service also runs a range of regular support groups for carers targeted at specific groups e.g. Kinship Carers. This offers the opportunity for carers to get together, share ideas and gain peer support. A Peer Mentoring system is also in place where more experienced carers are linked to new and less experienced carers in order to provide practical advice and guidance relating to the fostering tasks.

As part of our ongoing improvement work, we are looking at ways of improving our support offer to foster carers both from the fostering service, and via our partnership with Health to ensure a more responsive CAMHS service. This will support carers better where behavioural, mental health, and attachment issues are causing placement instability. In addition, our training programme for foster carers includes modules that better prepare them to work with children who exhibit these more complex behaviours.

Feedback from foster carers in Wirral about the support they receive is outdated and we plan to introduce a survey during 2019 that will then be repeated annually.

Unplanned breakdowns and disruptions in placements should always be avoided if possible due to the uncertainty they create for children. The majority of our placements breakdown following a notice period by the foster carer so a planned move can be organised. In-house foster carers gave notice on the placements of 27 children in the current financial year. Following additional work and support 8 of these have subsequently remained in their placement. The remainder have moved to alternative placements including return to birth family in some of these cases. In 2019 we are implementing a new process to ensure we learn the lessons from placement breakdowns, and take steps to reduce levels still further.

At the present time 38 care leavers have continued to live with their previous Wirral foster carers under a "Staying Put" arrangement. While this is right and appropriate for these individuals, one of the consequences is that it reduces the capacity within our existing pool of foster carers. Up to date comparative data is not available. However, for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017, Wirral had more children in staying put arrangements than any other local authority in the North West, and this shows a high level of commitment to supporting the transition of young people into adulthood. Staying Put arrangements are monitored via the care leavers panel that was introduced in 2018 in order to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of individual children.

## **RECOMMENDATION/S**

For the report to be noted.

## **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S**

Not Applicable

### **2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

Not Applicable

### **3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

3.1 Wirral currently has 833 children looked after (CLA) as at 25<sup>th</sup> January 2019. These children are mainly placed in a small number of different types of provision as follows:

- 623 (75%) in some form of foster placement
- 73 (9%) in residential placements
- 104 (12.5%) placed at home with their own parents

The remainder are placed in a variety of other arrangements e.g. Residential Special Schools, mother and baby placements, independent living etc.

Foster placements for Wirral children looked after are sourced via a mixed economy model utilising both in-house and externally purchased placements. A high proportion of children 511 (82% of those in foster placements) are placed within our in-house fostering service and this makes Wirral one of the larger local authority fostering services in the North West region. For comparison purposes, at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017 (the last set of published data) Wirral was the second largest provider of local authority foster placements in the North West Region. Only Lancashire provided more placements (620) and had a children looked after population of 1850. In the intervening period we have continued to provide for the placement needs of a similar number of children although due to the increases in numbers of children looked after the actual proportion placed in the in-house service has decreased. In house foster placements are provided for 61% of our total children looked after population, this is 6% higher than similar local authorities.

The cohort of in-house foster placements can be divided still further into 2 distinct categories:

- a) Mainstream foster carers – these are carers that the local authority has actively recruited and assessed. They account for 316 (51%) of the children in the total foster placement cohort. These placements are provided by 180 fostering households. We have an ongoing recruitment campaign to build on this cohort who have a range of experience, from recent recruits to others who have been fostering for very many years.

- b) Kinship Carers – these are carers who are part of the child’s extended ‘family & friends’ network. They account for 195 (31%) of the children in the total foster placement cohort. These placements are provided by 135 fostering households. Kinship carers usually put themselves forward as carers once concerns about children become apparent. They are usually approved under temporarily arrangements at the start of legal care proceedings pending a fuller assessment that determines suitability to provide a more permanent home.

A number of mainstream fostering households (28) are currently “inactive” for a range of reasons including carers taking a break from fostering, foster carer ill health etc. This figure amounts to 15.5% of mainstream and is broadly in line with average for England (16%) reported for the year 2016/17.

Committee members will be aware of the increase in numbers of children looked after in Wirral over the last 3 years. This trend is replicated across the North West. The increase has coincided with a decline in the number of recruited foster carers across the region resulting in all local authorities having difficulties in providing sufficient placements. The supply and demand issues in foster care has resulted in children’s home placements being used for children who previously would have been looked after by foster carers. The overall placement market is therefore more challenging than at any point in recent or distant history.

This regional picture is reflected nationally. In July 2018 the government published its response to a) the Education Select Committee “inquiry into fostering” (Dec 2017), and b) the DfE Independent review “Foster Care in England” (Feb 2018). The response report noted that:

“...there continues to be a steady decrease in the number of approved fostering households and there are fewer actual places available for children. The number of children in care increased at a faster rate than the number of fostering places, which may suggest the fostering sector is struggling to keep up with increased demand”.

Despite this challenging environment Wirral continues to place a good proportion of children in foster placements, and within the in-house fostering service, despite the increase in numbers of children looked after. External placements are only sought when it is apparent that the in-house fostering service is unable to meet the need for individual children.

The average placement cost in Wirral is £294.53 (without any addition for overheads). Work has been undertaken nationally to try to establish the true cost of local authority foster care with no reliable formula available. However, using the above figures and for illustrative purposes, allowing 10% overheads increases the unit cost to £323.98; adding 25% overheads increases the unit costs to £368.16. Our in-house costs compare favourably to other local authorities and are significantly better than Independent Fostering Agencies whose average placement cost is around £800 per week.

## **3.2 Foster Carer Recruitment**

3.2.1 In the current financial year, the Wirral fostering service has received 226 enquiries from prospective new mainstream foster carers. The full year figure to 31st March 2018 was 245 enquiries suggesting the level of activity this year is similar. The fostering service has an annual recruitment and marketing strategy that includes events running during the national “Fostering Fortnight”. Our range of other recruitment activity includes contributing to the North West “You Can Foster” campaign. Recruitment activity has included:

- Foster carer “ambassadors” have run stalls at supermarkets, summer fetes/festivals. They have also held regular drop in sessions at Starbucks in new Brighton and West Kirby Library
- Foster carers sharing information on social media including use of facebook and Tweeting information re fostering
- Press and social media advertisements and interviews with foster carers
- “Bus backs”, billboards and display screens
- Activities in relation to the May fostering fortnight including a fostering fun run
- “Big Heart” campaign launched in November
- Targeted recruitment for specific groups e.g. teenagers
- Regional You Can Foster Campaign
- April month of radio campaigns with Radio City

Specific focus campaigns for the early part of 2019 are: January teenagers; February Sibling Groups; March children with a disability.

The vast majority of prospective foster carers make contact with the Wirral fostering because they have heard about us from other professionals (word of mouth) or through recommendation by existing Wirral foster carers. This cohort accounts for 42% of all contacts into the service. A further cohort (22%) contact the service following internet searches. A slighter smaller proportion (14%) make contact in response to newspaper adverts, and 9% come to our attention via the Regional You Can foster campaign.

The number of new mainstream approvals so far this financial year is 18 with a further 8 likely to progress to the fostering panel before the end of March. This will mean 26 new households will have been recruited and is 3 more than last year.

Wirral processed and approved 110 Family and Friends foster carer applications in the last financial year. This was by far the highest in the North West. The next highest number was completed by Liverpool and this may be indicative a) of the approach being taken by the Liverpool courts, and/or b) the number of care applications that have been filed.

Our capacity to recruit new mainstream carers to the service in a timely manner this year was reduced by:

- a) maternity leave and sickness absence in the service
- b) the impact of needing to undertake a high volume of kinship care assessments as part of court directed work.

In relation to the latter issue, a number of “court ordered” assessments of family members have resulted in no placement being made despite the carers being assessed and approved. This is because plans change during the course of care proceedings, but a lot of time and effort goes into work that does not add any value to the fostering service.

### **3.3 Retention**

- 3.3.1 In the current financial year 25 mainstream foster carers have left the service. The reasons for carers leaving are varied and are detailed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Reasons for foster carers leaving the service**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Number of Carers</b>
Adopted Child	1
Approval Terminated by the local authority	5
Carer Resigned	17
Carer Retired	1
Carer's health	1

### **3.4 Foster Carer Training and Support**

- 3.4.1 Foster carers in Wirral are supported by their allocated supervising social worker who undertakes regular visits to review progress in relation to children placed, and reviews development and support needs including training.

The service runs weekly support groups for carers with different levels of needs. This offers the opportunity for carers to get together, share ideas and gain peer support. Training is also offered in small taster sessions. The mainstream group runs every Monday morning and Kinship carers are also welcome to join this group. Another group is held specifically for those carers who tend to have children with more complex needs placed with them. Connected carers are invited to attend a group designed to meet their specific needs. “Kids for Caring” is a support group for the sons and daughters of foster carers who are of secondary school age. The group meets once a month.

It is a requirement that all prospective carers undertake the “Skills to Foster Training” before they progress to stage 2 of the application process where the full fostering assessment is undertaken.

In addition, foster carers need to attend training as part of the requirements of their registration. Training courses are grouped as “Priority” and “Continuing Development”. Priority courses should be completed within the first 12

months of approval and include: Basic First Aid; Equality and Diversity; Internet Safety; Managing Behaviour that Challenges – Basic Level; Recording and Reporting; Signs and Symptoms of Child Abuse & Neglect.

There is a wider range of training in the Continuing Development module including Mental Health; Attachment and its Implications; Preparing Young People for Adult; Therapeutic Interventions. This is not an exhaustive list and the full range of training and support is set out in a comprehensive resource booklet for carers. Carers are expected to use this to formulate an annual training plan with their Supervising Social Worker.

### **3.5 Placement Stability**

- 3.5.1 In the current financial year 22 carers have given notice on children placed. This relates to 27 children. Eight of these have remained in placement following the convening of “Disruption Meetings” and the provision of additional support. For a further 2 children, although they remain in the same placement, work is being undertaken to find suitable alternative long-term placements. Five children have now returned to live with their birth families either through rehabilitation to parents or to live with another family member. Ten children have moved to alternative foster placements and are now settled, and a further 2 children have moved into residential placements.

Reasons for placement breakdowns include incompatibility of children placed, behavioural issues, or carers deciding to stop fostering e.g. due to ill health or a change in family circumstances. As part of our ongoing improvement work, we are looking at ways of improving our support offer to foster carers both from the fostering service, and via our partnership with Health to ensure a more responsive CAMHS service. This will support carers better where behavioural, mental health, and attachment issues are causing placement instability. In addition, our training programme for foster carers includes modules that better prepare them to work with children who exhibit these more complex behaviours.

### **3.6 Staying Put**

- 3.6.1 The Children and Families Act 2014 amended Section 23 of the Children Act, 1989 to introduce a duty on local authorities to enable children formerly looked after to be able to remain living with their foster carers once they become 18 and up to the age of 21. Wirral currently has 38 care leavers who have remained living with their existing foster carers who have been approved by Wirral. These arrangements can remain in place until a young person becomes 21 years of age although some opt to move on to their own accommodation before.

### **3.7 Response to the Challenges**

- 3.7.1 Despite what appears to be a well performing fostering service with numbers bolstered by our level of kinship care placements, we are keen to continue to improve to future proof ourselves against some negative market factors. The supply and demand factors are leading to increased costs in the independent



fostering market and a consequent similar dynamic within the residential market. Having a high performing fostering service is therefore key to insulating ourselves against the current market forces.

We have a comprehensive action plan to progress the quality of service delivery. This action plan includes key development activity that will modernise the service and create better opportunities to further develop the service. Higher level activity includes:

1. Reconfiguration of the fostering teams into functional areas to ensure a stronger focus on recruitment and assessment; mainstream foster carer support; and kinship care assessment and support.
2. Implementation of a new format for conducting Exit Interviews so that we fully understand why foster carers leave the service and what action we can take to better retain existing carers.
3. Annual survey of all foster carers to establish levels of foster carer satisfaction and establish their views about what we need to do to improve the service.
4. Seeking to maximise use of our existing approved carers by closer tracking and monitoring of those households classed as inactive.
5. Looking to maximise recruitment of mainstream carers by converting experienced kinship carers who have a good track record to become mainstream carers.
6. Review of our marketing and recruitment strategy to ensure we maximise opportunities to recruit new carers by investing more resources in the methods we know we work best.
7. Creating a standalone website to ensure any internet searches take the reader straight to the Wirral fostering site.
8. Reviewing our arrangements for out of hours support to foster carers.

#### **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 There are no financial implications relating to this report. It is however worth noting that the more placements we can provide in-house the less placements will need to be sourced via the independent sector. Our current objective is therefore to increase the proportion of placements provided via the in-house fostering service.

#### **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 The in-house fostering service is bound by the legislative framework set out in the Care Standards Act and the associated Fostering Services Regulations & National Minimum Standards. These provide a tight legal framework for conduct. Whilst the fostering service is not required to formally register with the Regulator, it does need to have a nominated manager who is approved by Ofsted as a suitable person to Manage the service.

## **6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: ICT, STAFFING AND ASSETS**

6.1 There are none arising from this report.

## **7.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

7.1 None to note other than the increased costs associated with not running an effective in-house fostering service that provides less placements than it currently does.

## **8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

8.1 Not Applicable

## **9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 Not Applicable

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## **APPENDICES**

## **REFERENCE MATERIAL**

### **SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)**

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>