

REPORT AUTHOR SUPPORT GROUP

Tuesday, 25 May 2021

REPORT TITLE:	FOSTERING AND ADOPTION ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT. REPORTING PERIOD 1 APRIL 2020 – 31ST MARCH 2021
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

REPORT SUMMARY

The report provides members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee with an overview of fostering and adoption performance during the financial year of 2020 – 2021 and how this links to the Council's children looked after 'sufficiency duties'¹.

A key priority for Children's Services is for children looked after to be living in family-based settings, most notably foster placements. At the end of the reporting period (31st March 2021) 59% of children were living in local authority 'in-house' foster placements. Overall, 71% of children are living in foster placements taking into account 12% of those in placed with private fostering agencies (IFA). Despite the challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic during the last 12 months, the number of Wirral children living in foster care has remained stable. Wirral has a similar profile in comparison with statistical neighbours and the national picture for children living in foster care.

In accordance with the Children Looked After Plan, key priorities relating to fostering have been to support the recruitment of new carers, managing retention, developing the skills of foster carers, and finally to support placement stability. While there remains challenges to ensuring there is sufficient numbers and types of foster placements to meet the increase in children looked after and also to respond to the complexity of needs, there have been notable successes, including the recruitment of 11 new fostering households.

The re-launch of the marketing campaign late last year (2020) resulted in significant increase in the number of enquiries resulting in approvals of new foster carers.

The development of an action plan for the Fostering Service will continue to drive improvements such as continuing to increase recruitment and developing new performance and monitoring tools to ensure the offer and quality of support remains consistently good.

¹ Local Authority Sufficiency Duty – places a responsibility on local authorities to have in place arrangements to meet the placement needs of children looked after.

During the reporting period 25 children have been adopted, with a further 23 children currently placed with their prospective adoptive families. However, performance in adoption has been impacted because of COVID-19 that is reflected at a regional and national level. Pre-COVID-19, Adoption in Merseyside (AiM), the regional adoption agency which Wirral is part of, was performing in line with statistical neighbours and national timescales. Work is ongoing to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on adoption timeliness with evidence of improvements in performance emerging.

Work to support fostering and adoption remain key elements of the council's overall strategic aim to secure 'Brighter Future's' for Wirral's children and young people.

This report does not relate to a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is requested to note the fostering and adoption performance information contained within this report.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 To provide a briefing to the members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee on performance for fostering and adoption.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 No other options have been considered as this is a performance report for members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 **The Fostering Service:** The Service aims to provide a range of high-quality and safe foster placements that meet the needs of our children looked after in line with the council's sufficiency duties and fostering standards. The main responsibilities of the Service are:
- Recruitment and assessment of new foster carers
 - Support, supervision, and training of foster carers including family and friends' carers (connected carers)
 - Ensuring provision of local safe and supportive foster placements in accordance with Fostering National Minimum Standards
 - Promoting placement stability and permanence planning for children looked after.
- 3.2 Following a re-organisation which concluded in October 2020, the Service is shaped around three key areas (1) Recruitment and Assessment; (2) Mainstream Support; and (3) Connected Support. Feedback from staff in the Service and foster carers is that the revised arrangements are proving to be more effective. The Service structure is attached as Appendix A.
- 3.4 Currently the Fostering Service manages a total of 383 mainstream foster carer and connected carer households. This is broken down to 160 mainstream households and 135 connected households. The remaining are being supported through the recruitment stage.
- 3.5 **Adoption Service:** Wirral is part of a regional adoption agency, Adoption in Merseyside (AiM). AiM consists of Wirral, Knowsley, Liverpool and Sefton local authorities. Knowsley is the host local authority for the project.
- 3.6 Wirral's performance for adoption is measured by The Adoption Scorecard. This is published by the Government and gives a national picture of how well local authority adoption services are performing. The three indicators discussed later in this paper (A2, A10 and A20) are used to measure and monitor local authority performance.

4.0 FOSTERING

4.1 Placements

- 4.2 As of 31 March 2021 there were 826 children looked after (provisional data) for whom the Council is the child's legal guardian often referred to as the Corporate Parent. 492 of these children are living with in-house foster carers (59%) with a further 97 (12%) with independent carers. Data on placement profile is attached as Appendix B.
- 4.3 The number of children placed in foster care has been maintained when reviewed in line with the previous year's performance (58% on 31st March 2020). Statistical benchmarking indicates that Wirral has a greater percentage of children placed in local authority foster carer compared to statistical neighbours, (56%) national average, (49%) and north west average (50%).
- 4.4 There is a continued high demand for foster placements for specific children and young people. These include:
- Parent and child placements: Currently Wirral has two carers who are approved to take a parent and child placements
 - Teenagers and children with complex needs, particularly those who have suffered trauma and present with emotional and behavioural needs.
- 4.5 The Fostering Service is working closely with the Commissioning team to help step down children from IFA and residential placements. During the 2020-2021 financial year, there have been four children (two children from residential placements and two children from IFA) stepped down into mainstream placements. Despite these being relatively small numbers there is a significant saving to the council for each child that can be placed with in-house foster carers.

4.6 Foster Carer Recruitment

- 4.7 Wirral's Marketing Plan 2020/2021 focussed on the 'Big Heart' messaging developed in 2019/20. The key messaging throughout the year focussed on:
- Anyone can foster – Big Heart campaign
 - Need for foster carers for teenagers
 - Continued need for fostering throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 4.8 These messages were consistently applied across all advertising formats including the use of social media, digital and radio campaigns and features in resident's newsletters.
- 4.9 A review of the marketing campaign was undertaken in autumn 2020 and a new look campaign refreshed for a dedicated recruitment drive from December 2020 to March 2021. The key change to the marketing campaign was to ensure fostering was promoted as "open to anyone; Foster Carers come from all walks of life".
- 4.10 This, and subsequent campaigns, have been supported by current foster carers who play an active part in the recruitment of new foster carers as they can help to portray a realistic and positive view. The Service is also making increased use of digital

channels and the 2021/22 campaign will build on the existing 'Home is where the heart is' branding but focus on recruitment. This campaign push was planned to coincide with Foster Carer Fortnight in May 2021. Key recruitment areas for 2021/22 will focus on parent and child placements, along with foster carers for adolescents.

- 4.11 The marketing campaign is reviewed quarterly to ensure it is robust enough to deliver its objectives. The priority will continue to be to increase the number of fostering enquiries and subsequently foster carers to provide placements for all children.

4.12 Evaluation of Recruitment Activity – Mainstream Foster Carers

- 4.13 In total, 124 enquiries were received for 2020-2021. The new marketing campaign was launched in December 2020 and that this has led to an increase in enquiries receiving a total of 45 in Quarter 4. This figure is over a third of all enquiries for the whole year and evidences the impact of the marketing campaign in December. Data on enquiries received per quarter during April 2020 – March 2021 is attached as Appendix B.
- 4.14 Following initial enquiries, the service responds within one working day and where applicants cannot be contacted, response will continue with a maximum of three follow up contacts. The outcome of the 124 enquiries is attached as Appendix B.
- 4.15 Of the 124 household enquiries to fostering, 25 applicants have been progressed to full assessment. Of these 25 applicants, 11 were approved indicating a conversion rate of 1 in 10. Following the outcome of 14 assessments underway it is possible that the service will achieve a conversion rate of 1 in 5, reflecting the national average.

4.16 Assessment – Foster Carers

- 4.17 The National Minimum Standards for Fostering state that a mainstream assessment should be presented to Fostering Panel within 8 months of the application to be assessed. This timescale was met for all 11 cases identified above. Of the 14 mainstream assessments underway, some of these carers are having an assessment as parent and child carers and a number as potential for teenage and sibling groups. This is already meeting the demand target groups identified.

4.18 Training and Support

- 4.19 During the current COVID pandemic, the Fostering Service continued to provide bi-weekly drop-in training and support group to all foster carers virtually and the feedback received has been extremely positive.
- 4.20 The Service has also recognised the need to undertake further work with all carers around the completion of training, diary sheets, Personal Development Plans and Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDS).

4.21 Feedback from Foster Carers

- 4.22 A survey was completed during this reporting period and 83% of foster carers reported feeling satisfied with the Fostering Service. Some quotes from foster carers are detailed below;

‘Thank you so much you are always here to support me straight away. It’s been lovely to have you as my social worker it really has the support from you is amazing.’

‘We would like to say thank you, thank you for the support that you give us, our family is on this journey with social care involvement and new challenges seem to appear. You don’t have a magic looking glass but you take the time to explain the situation to us, which we really appreciate, and we both feel grateful for this.’

‘Thank you for your letter to foster carers I just want to say Thank you to all our Social Workers and Supervising Social workers I know it has been difficult through this pandemic, but I have had a first class service from you all and as a result been able to support the young person in our care. The training has been better than ever and I have enjoyed taking part even the drop ins have been very good varied and interesting. All I can say is A BIG THANKYOU TO YOU ALL. I have not seen any reduction in support you are only a phone call away and I believe the communication has improved during the pandemic. Give yourselves a big pat on the back and please know you are all Appreciated.

4.23 Summary of fostering key achievements and priorities

- 4.24 The key achievements during 2020 – 21 for the Fostering Service were:
- Service re-organisation which allowed for the development of three distinct teams enabling an enhanced focus on assessment, mainstream support and connected support.
 - Successfully recruited three permanent Team Managers.
 - Increased administrative support by 50%.
 - Reviewed the Fostering Panel processes and appointment of a new Panel Chair and Panel Advisor.
 - The development of key performance indicators which has resulted in improved compliance.
 - Reviewed and developed foster carer support groups to include a specific group for connected carers.
 - Increased fostering enquiries in Quarter 4 following a new marketing campaign.
- 4.25 In order to ensure that there is a continued drive to improve outcomes for children an action plan has been developed. The key priorities for development during 2021- 22 are:
- To review the existing foster carer group to ensure they have the appropriate skills and abilities to meet the complex needs of children looked after. This will include making key decisions where foster carers do not meet the expected standards.

- Improve retention through understanding, reviewing and improving the benefits package available to carers.
- Foster carers to be supported to demonstrate improved compliance on completion of training, diary sheets and personal development plans.
- To ensure personal development plans are based on needs of the child/ren placed.
- Focus on improving pathways to support data reporting/ extraction.
- Introducing new templates/ forms to improve recording and compliance with National Minimum Standards and recording in a way that puts the child/ren at the centre.
- Increasing the number of carers approved in line with the sufficiency strategy and build on work undertaken so far.

5. ADOPTION

5.1 Adoption Indicators

5.2 The following indicators are used to monitor performance of adoption:

A2 Indicator 2016-2019

The average time between a Placement Order being made and a match being approved by the Agency Decision Maker – the target set by Government is 122 days.

A10 Indicator 2016-2019

The average time a child spent in care before living with adopters – the target set by Government is 426 days.

A20 Indicator 2016-2019

The average time between a Wirral child entering care and the Local Authority being granted a Placement Order from the Court - the Government target is 257 days.

5.3 Performance: 2016 -2019

5.4 Wirral's adoption performance during the period 2016-2019 was positive and broadly in line with targets. The Adoption Scorecards for 2016-2019 were released in August 2020. Data published for this period demonstrates that Wirral is performing better than statistical neighbours and more favourably against the Government timescales, except for the A2 indicator.

Scorecard 3-year Average – Published Data 2016-19 – 69 Children Adopted					
A2		A10		A20	
167	166	367	373	250	272
Wirral	Stat Neighbours	Wirral	Stat Neighbours	Wirral	Stat Neighbours

- 5.5 Between 2016 and 2019, 69 children were adopted. As indicated in the table above, for those 69 children, the average time from placement order and ADM decision (A2) was 167 days which is 45 days more than the Government target of 122 days. This was slightly higher than statistical neighbours at 166.
- 5.6 Within this period, the average time a child spent in care before beginning to live with their adopters (A10) was 367 days which compares favourably against the target set by government of 426 days.
- 5.7 The average time between a Wirral child entering care and the local authority being granted a Placement Order from the court was 250 days which compares favourably against the Government target of 257 days.

5.8 Performance 2019-2021

- 5.9 Wirral currently have 19 children who were made subject to a Placement Order in 2018 or 2019. Of these children 10 are currently in their adoptive placement progressing towards an Adoption Order. Of the remaining children, 7 children have a change of plan being proposed through revoking the Placement Order and 2 children remain with their carers who are considering adoption. These cases have impacted our A2 and A10 performance as we have been unable to secure permanence through an Adoption Order these children from this period. Due to this and the impact of the pandemic on court capacity, the subsequent reporting period (2019-2022), the Adoption Scorecard shows a more variable performance.

2019-2020 & 2020-2021 Average

Wirral Year Average					
2019-2020			2020-2021		
A2	A10	A20	A2	A10	A20
228	492	288	245	356	230

- 5.10 In the reporting period above, there were 61 adoptions completed. The table illustrates a decrease in timeliness in all three areas in 2019-2020. There are several reasons for this:
- There were children with Placement Orders from previous years, where children had plans for adoption approved but it was difficult to match these children to adopters.
 - There was a higher proportion of sibling groups and older children being placed for adoption which resulted in the challenges identified above.
 - There was a lack of available adopters from AiM and although the Recruitment, Assessment and Family Finding Team within AiM was restructured in 2019 to address adopter sufficiency, there continues to be a national shortage of adopters particularly for sibling groups or older children.

- d) The COVID-19 pandemic created delays for court hearings. In most cases, there has been at least 3-4 months delay which has reduced the numbers of Placement Orders issued and Final Adoption Orders granted. The timeliness of Adoption Orders being granted has been impacted by parents exercising their legal right to contest Adoption Hearings.

6.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 **Adoption:** Wirral's 2020/2021 financial contribution share towards AiM is 36.41% and this equates to £1,200,000. This has been agreed as part of the financial model for the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA). In 2020/2021 there was an overspend which was mainly due to inter-agency fees. During the reporting period £200,000 was spent on inter-agency fees which is a 50% reduction in comparison to the previous year.

7.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. The Service is operating in accordance with the council's statutory duties and responsibilities.

8.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 8.1 There are sufficient staffing resources at present within the Fostering Service and within AiM to cover the demand. Within AiM, all staff from the four local authorities are allocated Knowsley IT equipment in line with the regional information sharing agreement. Wirral Adoption staff are seconded to Knowsley who are the host LA. The secondment agreement is in its 3rd year. The service is 98% staffed and sickness is managed by the current staff unless it is long term sick and has an impact on service delivery and capacity.

9.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 9.1 **Fostering:** the main risks is ensuring that there is a sufficient number of foster placements to meet the needs of children looked after. During the 12 month period the number of fostering placement capacity has remained static taking into account recruitment and retention. Recruitment of new foster carers will continue to be a challenge for the foreseeable future. However, this can be managed unless there is a significant increase in the numbers of children looked after.
- 9.2 **Adoption:** If AiM fails to recruit appropriate adopters for children subject to a Placement Order, it is likely to result in delays in finding a forever home for a child. This is likely to impact on older children or those with complex needs. As noted in paragraph 6.2 there is also a risk regarding the number of inter-agency placements that are commissioned and the associated costs.
- 9.3 If plans for permanence through adoption are not progressed timely it is likely to have a negative impact upon the long-term stability of that child. However, it may also result in local authority revoking the Placement Order and changing their care plan to long-term fostering. This will result in increased number of children in care where the local authority will have parental responsibility until the child reaches 18 years old.

10.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 10.1 Recruitment campaigns are supported by our current foster carers who play an active part in the recruitment of new carers as they can help to portray a realistic and positive view of fostering. Several foster carers work with the communications team and feature in the advertising campaign on radio and online videos to support recruitment campaigns.
- 10.2 The Fostering Service undertakes annual review of foster carers which allows for an opportunity to reflect over the previous year, consult others, acknowledge what has gone well and consider challenges as well as exploring support needs. The Service consults with social workers and agencies involved with the child as part of the assessment process. The Service engages with the independent Fostering Panel.
- 10.3 All foster carers have the ongoing support of a social worker; the child will also have their own social worker. They also have the support of other foster carers, the option for a peer mentor. Regular e-newsletters are sent to foster carers to keep them up to date with advice, guidance, events and experiences of other foster carers.

11.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 Children looked after are a marginalised group and we actively seek the most diverse carers to meet the needs of our children. This is reflected in our recruitment campaigns for both fostering and adoption.

12.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1 There are no environment or climate implications arising from this report.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Service Structure
Appendix B – Placement Data

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Fostering services: National Minimum Standards – GOV.UK
- Adoption Scorecards – GOV.UK
- Chat report March 2021
- AIM Annual Report 2019-2020
- AIM 6 Monthly Panel Activity Report April 2020 – September 2020
- Wirral Council Plan 2025

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
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