

REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

FOSTERING SERVICE PROGRESS REPORT

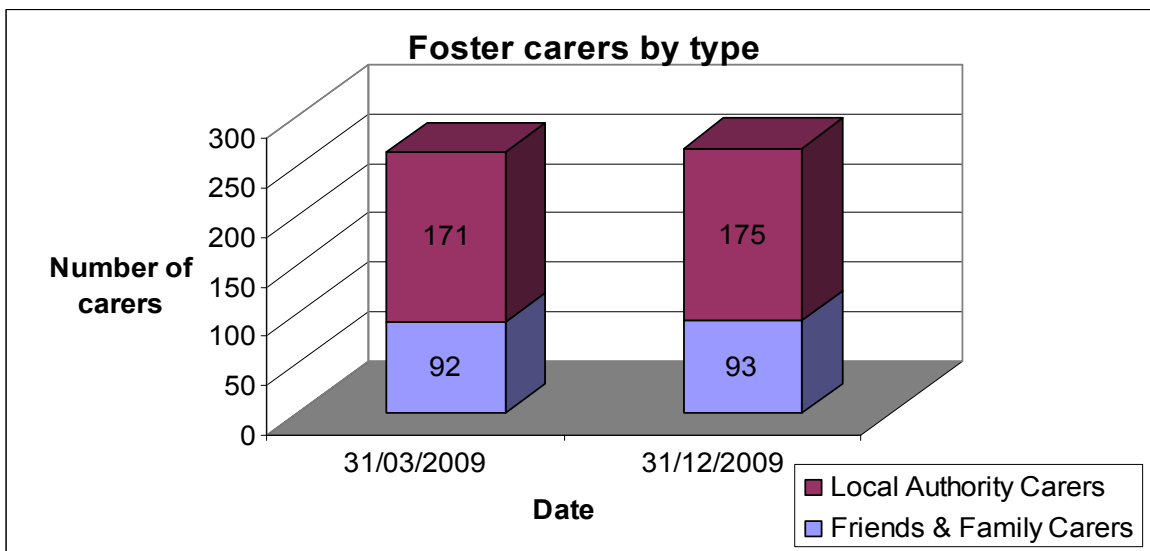
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is to update members on the business of the Fostering Service during 2009/10. More specifically the report will focus on further progress made in implementing the recommendations of the Scrutiny report into the Fostering Service; it follows an interim report received by this Committee in January 2009.

1. Background

- 1.1 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2009 there were 263 registered Foster Carers within the service. Figures from the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2009, show that there have been 55 new Foster Carers approved, of which 39 were friends and family (kinship) Foster Carers and 16 were general carers.
- 1.2 Figures also show that 50 Foster Carers have left the service during this period. Of these, 13 Foster Carers chose to seek a Special Guardianship order or a Residence Order for the children they were caring for and one of the Foster Carers became an adoptive parent. There were, 35 Foster Carers who chose to end their registration when children left placement, these were however mostly friends and family carers. Only one Foster Carer was deregistered by the Fostering panel. None of the Foster Carers who left chose to join independent fostering agencies.
- 1.3 At the 31 December 2009 there were 268 registered foster carers making an overall increase of 5 foster carers so far this financial year.
- 1.4 The above information is summarised in the chart below, which also highlights the split between friends and family (kinship) Foster Carers and general carers within the service.



- 1.5 In addition to the above there are 9 families currently being assessed as general Foster Carers. The assessments are due to be presented to the fostering panel in either January or February 2010.
- 1.6 There is a training event planned this month, for prospective general Foster Carers and 8 families have confirmed their attendance.
- 1.7 Alongside recruitment, the Fostering Service has managed to retain several experienced Foster Carers. This currently includes families who have been fostering for 33 years, 28 years, 24 years, 22 years and 21 years respectively.
- 1.8 During 2009 the Fostering Service has received several messages praising the work of their Foster Carers. Most recently an e-mail was received from a Social Inclusion Manager in a school. The e-mail commented about the compassion shown by a one of the Foster Carers for the children placed with her and spoke positively about the Foster Carers involvement with the School.
- 1.9 The Fostering Service has continued to roll out the Children's Workforce and Development Council (CWDC) training and development standards. Many of the Foster Carers are now working towards completing their portfolio of evidence.
- 1.10 Developments are also taking place in relation to the Mother and Baby Fostering Scheme. A small task group has been meeting to develop the scheme into a Parent and Child Fostering scheme which involves the Foster Carer actively contributing to Social Work assessments.
- 1.11 The work of the Fostering Service has been assisted by there having been a stable staffing establishment throughout 2009. There were some gaps in strategic management due to the Service Manager for looked after children post being vacant between January 2009 and August 2009. The new Service Manager is now in post and strategic planning for the fostering service has returned to the forefront.
- 1.12 Despite the positive work with Foster Carers, new Service developments and the stable staffing establishing, it is however fair to say that the Fostering Service is facing increased pressure. This pressure is due in part to an increased request for Foster Placements for teenagers who often have a range of complex needs. In addition the Fostering Service is receiving a high volume of requests for assessments of prospective Family and Friend's Foster Carers from the Family Courts. These assessments often have to be completed within a very short timescale.
- 1.13 The Service Manager is however planning to relaunch the Fostering taskforce in the New Year. The taskforce will focus on enhancing the recruitment strategy to strengthen the service to respond to demand.

## **2. SCRUTINY OF THE FOSTERING SERVICE**

- 2.1 The original actions from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee scrutiny of the Fostering Service are listed below, followed by comments concerning the progress against each action.

### **3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE**

**The authority should continue to try to improve the stability of placements. This will be achieved by better matching of children and carers, which in turn is made possible by increased recruitment of foster carers**

As outlined in this report progress has continued in recruiting Foster Carers and retaining Foster Carers which clearly impacts on placement stability. It is important to note that Wirral has performed well against the national indicators relating to placement stability (NI 62 and NI 63). At October 2009 only 9.3% of looked after children in Wirral had experienced 3 or more placement moves on one year and 69.9% of children looked after in Wirral for 2.5 years have remained in the same placement for 2 years. A significant proportion of children looked after in Wirral (86%) are placed with foster carers or awaiting adoptive placements. The figures relating to placement stability are also a clear indicator of the stability of fostering placements.

**Ensure that foster children have ready access to their social workers and are able to maintain good communications, so that they are aware when the social worker might not be available and will know how to contact any alternatives**

Implementing this action continues to be assisted because the department has been able to recruit Social Workers and the staffing establishment has been relatively stable throughout the year. All Social Workers now have work mobile phones and an e-mail address which clearly assists in making communication more effective.

**Encourage social workers to be more proactive in their dealings with looked after children. Looked after children perceive them as the statutory decision makers but they should also be able to look on them as a friend**

All Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWS hereafter) within Social Care have benefited from attending training in relation to working with looked after children, as part of their induction process. More experienced Social Workers have been able to develop their knowledge further through attending formal Post Qualifying Training. Social Workers are therefore, developing a more secure knowledge base in relation to working with looked after children. In addition the Fostering Service are aware of numerous examples of where the Social Workers have been able to befriend children/young people living with Foster Carers. This has included Social Workers taking the child/young person for a meal out or to the park rather than restricting their meetings to formal settings. Several Social Workers have nominated children living with foster carers for a looked after children's award and attended the awards ceremony to offer their support.

**Give as much flexibility as possible to foster carers in relation to permissions for the involvement of looked after children in extra curricular activities.**

In relation to consent for looked after children to be involved in extra curricular activities, there has been some revision of the current policy.

The change in the policy allows for foster carers and social workers to give permission for looked after children to be involved in hazardous extra curricular activities, provided the activities are organised by Wirral local authority schools. This is because the risk assessments for such activities are scrutinised by the Children and Young People's Department's Health and Safety Officer routinely.

A fuller review of the policy is taking place following, the consultation exercise the Children in Care Council have recently undertaken on this issue.

### **Ensure that looked after children are aware of their financial entitlement**

The Fostering Service has written to all Foster Carers to advise them of the importance of informing children placed with them of their financial entitlements. In addition to this work has been undertaken to ensure that Independent Reviewing Officers routinely raise the question of children's financial entitlements as part of the review process. A further role of the new fostering taskforce will be to consider the development of placement information packs for Foster Carers and it is intended that financial information will be included within these packs.

## **4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOSTER CARERS**

**The authority should aim to widen the geographical area in which foster carers are recruited and ensure that the necessary network of support is in place to achieve that aim (and consider providing financial support for house extensions)**

This recommendation was made in view of the fact that the majority of foster carers had been located in the Wallasey and Birkenhead areas. A recruitment campaign was held earlier this year. This campaign was successful and resulted in Foster Carers being recruited from the Bebington and Eastham areas.

**Foster carers should be treated and accepted as fellow professionals. That would involve showing more trust in terms of information that is shared with them within legal limits they should have all the information necessary to ensure the welfare of the foster child, especially medical information**

Work continues within the Service to develop the role of Foster Carers as professionals. As referred to above, the Fostering Service has now rolled out the CWDC Training Support and Development Standards. As a result, Foster Carers are now evidencing their own professional competence. In addition there have been two other significant developments. Firstly those Foster Carers who receive a band three fee are receiving support from the Fostering Service to enable them to take on additional roles such as the supervision of contact. Secondly Foster Carers on the Mother and Baby scheme (soon to become Parent and Child Scheme) are receiving additional training to enable them to contribute to Social Work assessments.

**Also they should be made to feel valued, possibly by means of an annual awards ceremony or mayoral reception.**

The second 'Listen to Me' awards are due to be held this year. The first award ceremony in 2008 provided an opportunity for young people to nominate professionals who have listened to them. A number of Foster Carers were nominated and commended for the work they had undertaken.

Plans are now being progressed with the Mayor's office to hold a reception for Foster Carers. It is anticipated that this event will take place early in 2010.

**Access to training for foster carers should be improved with courses specific to their requirements (via an individual improvement plan) and convenient in terms of times, location and crèche facilities.**

The Fostering Service continues to run a monthly 'drop in' facility for Foster Carers. This offers the opportunity for Foster Carers to discuss issues relating to their training/development with a member of the Fostering Service. A crèche is provided as part of the 'drop in' facility.

Foster Carers continue to benefit from attending the general training provided by the department. In particular Foster Carers have attended training about permanency planning alongside Social Workers. Feedback confirmed that both groups benefited significantly from working alongside each other.

The Fostering Service will assist Foster Carers with the cost of childcare should this be required in order for them to attend a course.

As highlighted above, the CWDC pilot has now been rolled out across the service. This has resulted in Foster Carers identifying their own training needs and as a result specific courses are being delivered to meet those needs.

**Training should include health issues, as they affect both the child and the carer**

The issue of health is integral to the CWDC standards and as a result several Foster Carers have identified a need for health related information / support. Generally this has been responded to on an individual basis through links with the LAC Health Nurses. In addition the LAC Health Nurses continue to deliver health related training at the Foster Carer's 'drop in'. There are currently plans to deliver Sexual Health training to Foster Carers in conjunction with Brook Advisory Service.

**The foster carer's handbook should be updated on a regular basis**

The foster carer's handbook needs to be updated on an ongoing basis and is due to be fully reviewed and reissued in 2010.

**Ensure that payments to foster carers in particular Christmas allowances are paid promptly**

The Fostering Service continues to benefit from the SWIFT payments system. Following initial 'teething problems'; there have been no difficulties with payments and Christmas allowances for 2009 were paid promptly.

**There should be a strong encouragement for foster carers to attend school parents' evenings and personal education plan meetings and provide the means for doing so through additional childcare arrangements. Carers should have regular contact with the designated teacher.**

Foster Carers continue to be clear about their responsibilities in relation to the education of children placed with them. Through meetings with their supervising Social Worker and through using the CWDC portfolio they are required to evidence their attendance at parents' evening and contact with the designated teacher. A group of Foster Carers have recently contributed to an OFSTED 16-19 strategy inspection

during which they gave a good account of the support they offer children placed with them in terms of their education.

**Whilst it is accepted that they may be necessary in an emergency in which case additional support should be provided, exemption placement should be avoided**

The number of exemptions (more than three children in one placement) within the Fostering Service has remained stable at around 20 throughout 2009. Each exemption requires the completion of both a risk assessment and matching exercise before being presented to the Service Manager for approval. The majority of the exemptions currently in place are to enable siblings to remain together or are in place temporarily to enable the Foster Carer to provide a time limited respite placement. The level of exemptions is currently high and this is why there is a need to develop the strategies to enhance the capacity of the service. In the meantime the exemptions that are in place are subject to regular review.

**Provide departmental support for the foster carers association in order to help it to represent all carers in the borough, including taking over production of their newsletter.**

Unfortunately the Foster Carers Association ceased to operate during the Summer of 2009. The Association had been run by several long serving Foster Carers who all concluded that the time had come for some of the newer Foster Carers to take over. This decision may well have been prompted by the sad death of one of the Association members. It is now proposed to plan a 'relaunch' event in early 2010, with support from the Fostering Service it is hoped that the Association can become active again.

**Measures should be put in place to ensure that an individual contract (placement agreement) is always signed and in place in respect of each new placement.**

Significant improvements have been made in highlighting any gaps in LAC documentation within Foster placements. The LAC Service Manager receives information from the Independent Reviewing Officer who undertakes Foster Carer reviews concerning missing LAC documents (including placement agreements). This information is then shared with the District Managers who are ultimately responsible for the children's Social Workers. Ensuring signed placement agreements for each new placement will become another focus for the new fostering taskforce.

**The position of kinship carers should be clarified to ensure the correct level of support is provided for the child  
Foster carers should attend hearings of the fostering panel where appropriate**

The Fostering Service continues to approve and support kinship Foster Carers in relation to the national minimum standards in the same way that non related Foster Carers are approved and supported. At the same time however the Fostering Service recognises that Kinship Foster Carers may have unique needs arising from their Kinship status. As such the Fostering Service continues to identify one of the Team Leaders as having particular responsibility for Kinship Foster Care. Kinship Foster Carers are encouraged to attend and participate in training. There are currently several Kinship Foster Carers working to complete their CWDC portfolio.

## **5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL STAFF**

### **The staffing complement for social workers should be kept under review**

The Children's Social Care Branch continues to manage recruitment of Social Workers effectively. There continues to be a rolling programme of advertisements and recruitment events for District Social Workers which ensures that any vacancies are filled promptly. As mentioned elsewhere the staffing complement within the Fostering Service continues to be relatively stable. One Social Worker is currently acting into a Team Leader post; interviews for the Team Leader post are due to take place shortly.

### **The effectiveness of financial incentives should be reviewed in terms of both attracting staff and retaining them, taking into account of comparisons with other local authorities**

As highlighted above the Branch has been successful in attracting Social Workers and where appropriate, incentives such as 'golden hellos' are used. In terms of retaining staff the NQSW pilot continues which provides a programme of additional support and training. It is intended that this pilot will be rolled out to offer support beyond NQSW status culminating in the Advanced Social Work professional status.

### **Social workers concerns about the adequacy of administrative support should be addressed in a review of respective duties. The findings could be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

The Branch continues to implement the Remodelling Social Work Delivery Pilot. This Pilot has focused on opportunities to maximise Social Work time spent with children and families, which has in part been enabled through greater clarity about the role of operational support. The findings from the Remodelling pilot, are informing future developments. The Transformational Change Team is also providing business analyst capacity to support the review of operational systems and processes.

### **Consideration should be given to reviewing the system for weighting of social workers caseloads**

A system of caseload management for Social Workers is being considered, following a review of local and national schemes. This will be piloted, before being rolled out across all Teams in 2010.

### **Full availability of information technology as a key element of communications and for effective case management should be a key priority for social work staff**

All Social Workers now have access to their own computer, this includes social workers in the Fostering Service. In addition all Social Workers are benefiting from continued support and training in relation to fully implementing the Integrated Children's System (ICS). The pace of change is accelerating now that an ICS Project Manager is in post, and four Data Officers have recently been temporarily recruited to support fieldwork teams in particular. The ICS Project Board is leading this work.

### **Improve communications between the family placement team and social work teams including a better understanding of each team's role**

Significant improvements have been made in the communication between the Fostering Service and the District Teams. For example the Service Manager meets regularly with the District Managers as a means of ensuring information is shared

between the two service areas. In addition the Team Manager for the Fostering Service regularly attends the Social Care Team Managers meetings. In early 2010 the Fostering Service Team Manager will be giving a presentation to the Team Manager's meeting concerning developments around parent and child fostering. The new Fostering Taskforce will draw its membership from both the Fostering Service and the Districts.

**Social workers relationships with foster carers and looked after children should be a key element of their training**

Permanency Planning training continues to be rolled out across Social Care. There are a number of Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW) and it is an expectation that they attend training in working with looked after children (to include children placed with Foster Carers) and permanency training. These training events have involved Social Workers working alongside Foster Carers allowing them to learn from each other's perspective.

**Social workers should be contactable mobile phone in the same way as family placement team members**

As outlined above all Social Workers continue to have work mobile phones. The Social Worker's mobile phone number is shared with Foster Carers and with children placed with Foster Carers.

**Consideration should be given to combining to a greater or lesser extent joint care meetings LAC reviews and PEP meetings in order to make more effective use of professional's time.**

Wherever possible LAC reviews and PEP meetings are combined, Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers do consider whether this is possible when LAC reviews are booked. It does however remain the case that combined reviews are not always an option. For example statutory timescales cannot be changed to enable a combined review. In addition some LAC reviews are called to consider specific issues other than education, it would not be appropriate to combine such a review with a PEP meeting.

**Every effort should be made to reduce the time taken for assessment of foster carers**

On average assessments continue to be completed within six months of the prospective Foster Carer wishing to be assessed. The Fostering Service has however experienced greater difficulty with some of the timescales in relation to assessment of family and friends carers. For example, for those children placed with unapproved family and friends carers, it is a statutory requirement that the assessment be completed within six weeks. In other cases the Courts impose tight timescales on the Fostering Service to ensure assessments of family and friends' carers are completed. Some of these difficulties will be resolved with the introduction of the new Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010, which propose more realistic timescales for the completion of family and friends foster care assessments.

**The team manager for family placement should not have to carry an individual case load in order that she can have a proper overview of the service and to be able to ensure that assessment deadlines are met.**



Currently the Team Manager for the Fostering Service has one fostering family still allocated to her. This case had remained with the Team Manager on the understanding that the Foster Carers were planning to retire soon, as there are plans for the children placed with them to move into a long term placement. The Service Manager has agreed to review this allocation with the Team Manager in January 2010 and if the Foster Carer's plan for retirement is still no further on then the case will be reallocated to another Supervising Social Worker. This represents a significant improvement from the position at the time of the original Scrutiny Report, which quite appropriately raised concerns about a Managers capacity to manage when they were holding a caseload.

**There should be no reason why the social worker or family placement worker does not attend hearings of the fostering panel or if they are not available are represented by a senior fellow professional who has a full understanding of the case in question**

The Service Manager regularly meets with the Chair of Fostering Panel and is made aware of any concerns in relation to panel attendance. No concerns have been reported in relation to supervising Social Workers attending panel. Some concerns were however reported in relation to Social Workers not attending panel. When aware of this concern the Service Manager sent a memorandum to the District Managers outlining the importance of Social Workers attending panel. There has been one fostering panel following the memorandum, at which concerns were still apparent in relation to Social Workers not attending panel. The Service Manager plans to attend the District Manager's meeting in January when the issue of Social Workers attendance at panel will be addressed.

**Every effort should be made to continue the improvement in the quality of reports to the fostering panel**

This continues to be a focus for the service. Both the Fostering Team Manager and Service Manager undertake a quality assurance role prior to reports being accepted onto the Fostering Panel Agenda. In addition as outlined above, the Service Manager meets with the chair of the Fostering Panel, who continues to hold a view that the quality of reports to the Panel are generally good.

**The family placement team should provide a regular report to the panel that brings its attention to any breakdowns on placements in a format that is acceptable to panel**

This recommendation has not been implemented. It is however intended that the Service Manager will raise this with the Chair of the Fostering Panel. This issue will also be addressed by the new Fostering Taskforce.

## **6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN**

**There should be tighter and more robust controls on school attendance of looked after children supported by timely and accurate information.**

Information on school attendance by looked after children, continues to be discussed at both the PEP meetings and LAC reviews. In addition the Service Manager is a member of the Enjoy and Achieve Strategy group through which plans are progressed to provide the strategic monitoring of looked after children's attendance.

**Emphasis should be given to identifying what skills looked after children might have in relation to extra curricular activities such as sports and music**

Information concerning looked children's extra curricular activities continues to be discussed as part of the placement planning meeting and at each LAC review. The Fostering Service is aware of several young people who are involved in activities such as martial arts, horse riding and army cadets. Each looked after child continues to receive a free leisure pass and several have benefited from holiday and weekend activities organised by the Social Inclusion officer. The recent LAC awards evening enabled the dance and drama talents of several looked after children to be showcased.

**7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL**

**That the profile of the virtual school be raised in order to ensure that all members of the council are aware of their role as corporate parents**

Information relating to the Virtual School is now clearly available to all council members via a dedicated website. Members of the virtual school have been visiting Social Work teams to share information about the role and function of the virtual school. In addition the Service Manager meets with the Head of the Virtual school to ensure effective service planning.

**That governors continue to act as a driving force in improving standards for looked after children**

The virtual school encourages involvement of School Governors. There is information available on the Virtual School website aimed specifically at School Governors, this includes the DFES guidance for Governors 'Supporting LAC Learners'.

**8. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WELFARE**

**That procedures for the provision of all necessary medical information to named nurses and other professionals including foster carers be reviewed.**

Information concerning the health of looked after children, continues to be shared both at placement planning meetings and LAC review meetings. As mentioned above one of the roles of new Fostering Task Force will be to ensure that foster carers always receive detailed LAC documents at the time of placement. Clearly the LAC documents should include health information. In addition the Service Manager meets with the named nurses, this provides an opportunity to raise concerns when there have been difficulties around information sharing.

**9. Conclusion**

The Scrutiny of the Fostering Service has provided a very useful framework for the continued development of services and partnership arrangements to improve outcomes for children placed in Foster Care. As outlined above, considerable progress has been made; areas where a specific and sharpened focus is still required will form the basis for the Fostering Task Force development plan.

## **10. Financial Implications**

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

## **11. Staffing Implications**

There are no particular staffing implications associated with this report.

## **12. Equal Opportunities Implications/Equality Impact Assessment**

Foster Care continues to be made available to all children and young people looked after, where family based care is the most appropriate way of meeting their needs. Equality Impact Assessments are being undertaken in relation to all policies and procedures relating to looked after children.

## **13. Community Safety Implications**

The aim of providing stable and secure Foster Placements is consistent with the aims of reducing offending and diverting young people from anti social behaviour.

## **14. Local Agenda 21 Implications**

The continued development of locally based Foster Placements reduces the need for travel by parents, carers and social workers.

## **15. Planning Implications**

There are no planning implications.

## **16. Anti-poverty Implications**

Full implementation of the national minimum fostering allowance now means that Foster Carers are properly remunerated for the care they provide to vulnerable children and young people.

## **17. Social Inclusion Implications**

Children placed with Foster Carers benefit from a placement in a family setting where they can develop trusting relationships with adults, who promote their inclusion in school leisure and community activities.

## **18. Local Member Support Implications**

Children placed with Foster Carers come from all wards within Wirral. Foster Carers live in all wards within Wirral.

## **19. Background Papers**

- Inspection Report Wirral Fostering Service 27<sup>th</sup> February 2008
- Inspection Report Wirral Fostering Service 25<sup>th</sup> July 2008.
- Report To Overview and Scrutiny Committee January 2009

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

That members note and comment on the attached update on the Scrutiny of the Fostering Service.

**Howard Cooper**  
**Director of Children's Services**