



CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 21 June 2022

REPORT TITLE:	FOSTERING ANNUAL REPORT 1ST APRIL 2021-31ST MARCH 2022
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

REPORT SUMMARY

This report is to provide an overview to the Children Young People and Education Committee of the Fostering Annual Report for the period of 31st March 2021 - 1st April 2022 for consideration and scrutiny. The Fostering Annual Report provides an overview of the fostering service in terms of:

- Key performance to date
- Analysis of current practice
- Key issues and risks
- Plans for continuous improvement and progress over the next 12 months.

The Fostering Annual Report 2021-22 is at appendix A.

This report is focussed on a key aspect of the Wirral Plan 2021-26: Working together for brighter futures for our children, young people and their families by breaking the cycle of poor outcomes for all regardless of their background.

The report affects all wards but is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is recommended to:

1. Review and scrutinise the information contained within the Annual report attached at Appendix A; and agree the Annual Fostering Report 2021-22 as published.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The monitoring of the Fostering Service is required under the Care Standards Act 2000 and Fostering Regulations 2011 and the Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011. The Local Authority provides foster placements for children looked after whom the Local Authority acts as Corporate Parent for.
- 1.2 The purpose of this report is for the committee to evaluate the extent as to which Wirral Council has fulfilled its responsibilities as a Fostering Service providing placements for Children Looked After by the Council.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 It is a statutory requirement that the Fostering Service completes an annual report, the annual report will be presented to Corporate Parenting Board, therefore the option is not to bring it to this Committee.
- 2.2 This report could have been delivered as a briefing note however it was felt that a full report would ensure members are fully informed.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Wirral Fostering Service

- 3.1 The aim of the Fostering Service is to provide a range of high quality and safe foster placements that meet the needs of children looked after in line with the requirements of national guidance and fostering standards. The service is responsible for:
 - Support, supervision, and training of foster carers including family and friend 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 our children
 - Recruitment and assessment of new foster carers
- 3.2 The Fostering Service comprises of Head of Service, Operational Lead, 3 Managers who are responsible for Mainstream, Connected Persons and Recruitment and Assessment Teams. There are advanced social workers, supervising social workers and family support workers across the teams. Further information on the Team structure and roles and responsibilities are contained within the Annual Report document at appendix A.
- 3.3 Each year, the Fostering Service produces an Annual Report which provides an overview of the activity of the Service over the previous year, key performance and practice analysis including risks and issues and plans for the next 12 months. The Annual Report should be read in conjunction with the Foster Care Statement of

Purpose which sets out the legislative and regulatory context under which the local authority carries out its foster care responsibilities.

Annual Report Summary

- 3.4 As of 31st March 2022, there were 306 mainstream and connected Fostering Households. In total, these households support 58% of children looked after in Wirral.
- 3.5 A summary of the achievements, progress and plans in relation to supervision and support includes:
- a new reporting tool has been introduced on foster carer training. This has enabled a better understanding of the uptake of the five mandatory training sessions.
 - there is now evidence of improvements in foster carer training compliance resulting with current data showing 92% of carers have completed safer care, 63% recording and reporting, 59% safeguarding, 57% equality and diversity and 45% first aid.
 - Two of the mandatory training sessions will be incorporated into the Skills to Foster Programme so that they are completed before registration
 - A new provider for the First Aid training to offer a more flexible package for carers, making training available at weekends and evenings.
 - Mentoring schemes continue to be well received across the Service
 - A new 'Kinship' Service has been commissioned to provide emotional and practical support for connected carers
 - The Family Toolbox has been launched with foster carers to provide advice and guidance for all families
 - A review of fostering payments has commenced benchmarking against other local authorities and considering cost of living rises and inflation.
 - 51 Fostering Panels have been held
 - Two new experienced Fostering Panel chairs have been appointed and the central list of panel members has been increased
 - Feedback from those attending Panel meetings has been positive
 - Panel members report that the overall quality of assessments being presented to panel from the assessment team has significantly improved over the last 12 months
- 3.6 Further information about the progress of the Panel is within the Annual Report attached at appendix A.

Recruitment Summary

- 3.7 A summary of the achievements, progress and plans in relation to recruitment and retention includes:

- a review of the timeliness of foster carer assessment processes has been undertaken with mainstream assessments resulting in a new completion target of 12-weeks, which is in line with our Independent Fostering Agency competitors.
- an increased emphasis on marketing and promotion through campaigning which has included:
 - Press release launch in January 2022
 - Overview for visibility on the social media ads with 568 clicks through to the website over a 2.5-week period:
 - Linda Wilde – ITV Christmas Advent heroes’ campaign
 - Julie McLean Case study January 2022:
 - Tree planting event December 2021
 - Newsletter to carers

3.8 As a result of the marketing and promotion, there has been 152 enquiries to date this year, 37 higher than the previous year. This has resulted in an increase of mainstream assessments to 19 compared to 11 in 20-21. A break down in the result of all enquiries is contained within the report.

Challenges

3.9 Although record levels of enquiries were received from prospective fostering households during 21-22, the proportion that convert into applications is at an all-time low (6%), and half of what it was in 2014 to 2015 (12%).

3.10 Equally, the Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) market continues to impact significantly on the local authority’s ability to recruit foster carers, due to more aggressive marketing campaigns and high pay schemes for carers. IFAs also report a ratio of 25:1 initial enquiries to applications, whereas LAs reported a ratio of 7:1.

Service Priorities for 2022-2023

- Develop recruitment partnership working with local businesses, community groups as well as schools and colleges,
- Promote the Council as a Fostering Friendly organisation and encouraging other employers to become Fostering Friendly employers. The focus of this will be to:
 - Ensure the Wirral Fostering brand is visible in and around Wirral.
 - Provide our Foster Carers with benefits and payments that are comparable with our colleagues in other local authorities (Wirral has one of the lowest rates of foster carer pay in the Northwest).
 - Increase our online presence through social media and digital media.
 - Raise awareness of the need for more foster carers as well as to educate people on the role of foster carers, what they can achieve, who can foster and the differing types of fostering.
 - Convert more people thinking about fostering by engaging with these people (either face to face, on the phone or via the website) and communicating the strengths of being a Wirral Council foster carer.

- Attract people with work experience in managing complex behaviours and transferring these skills to fostering.
- Recruit to all vacant posts by end of Quarter 2 2022
- Continue the approach of valuing our current skilled group of foster carers to support our retention levels
- Ensure that all foster carers are attending mandatory training
- Introduce foster carer forums alongside foster carer coffee mornings to ensure that carers have access to managers and senior managers
- Increase capacity in the family mentor scheme to enable overnight stays for children and young people at risk of coming into care

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Annual Report references the need to focus on recruitment and retention of mainstream foster carers. The cost in not having enough foster carers in Wirral is not limited to emotional and physical well-being of children, but also in terms of the financial cost to the council
- 4.2 Placing children with Independent Fostering Agencies, can have financial implications for the council given that the local authority pays more than double the weekly amount for children to be placed.
- 4.3 For example, an in-house foster carer caring for a child aged 10, average weekly amount is approximately £250 including the skills banding payment whereas an independent foster agency carer, caring for the same child would cost £844 and a residential care home would on average cost £4,300 per week.
- 4.4 This means that if Wirral does not employ enough foster carers, and has to rely on Independent Fostering Agencies and residential children's homes the financial cost to the Council will be high.
- 4.5 The way to alleviate this is to increase the sufficiency of in house foster carers and the support offered to them.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The monitoring of the Fostering Service is required under the Care Standards Act 2000 and the Fostering Service Regulations 2011.
- 5.2 The local authority also has a duty to provide sufficiency of care options to children looked after, and as part of their sufficiency strategy local authorities must ensure they have adequate numbers of foster placements as laid down in the Care Standards Act 2000.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 There are no direct resource implications arising out of the report. The plans for next 12 months as outlined in the Annual Report may require additional staffing e.g., marketing officer, however, these will be subject to further reporting and approval.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 The Annual Report highlights several risks around the ability to recruit and retain new foster carers, and to effectively train and support foster carers. Ultimately, this may result in overall degradation in the ability to provide appropriate foster placements for children looked after, and in increasing reliance on high cost residential placement.
- 7.2 A recruitment officer post is required within the service which would assist with targeted recruitment. The service has already improved efficiency of response times to 'contacts' to the service, assessment timescales are reduced, and we are in the process of working through additional incentives to recruit more foster carers. We have been working closely with Wirral's marketing team and have engaged in fostering engagement sessions, 'fun days,' and also community events such as tree planting as joint community initiatives supporting recruitment and retention.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Fostering Annual Report will be shared with key stakeholders across the council and partners. Along with the Statement of Purpose, foster carers will be provided with copies of the report, and it will be available on the Policy and Procedure website for Social Care.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no environmental or climate implications arising from this report. However, the fostering service recently took part in a tree planting event near Birkenhead aimed at supporting foster carer recruitment/awareness as well as supporting improvements in the local environment and climate change.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 There are no community wealth implications arising out of the report.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Fostering Annual Report 2021/22
Appendix B Statement of Purpose Fostering 2022

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The Annual Fostering Report 2021/2022
Fostering services: National Minimum Standards – GOV.UK
Fostering in England 2020/2021 – GOV.UK
Chat report March 2022
Wirral Council Plan 2025

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Children Young People Education Committee	15th June 2021