

**ANNUAL REPORT  
TO:  
THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

**April 2014**

***The operation of the Fostering Service and the work of the Fostering  
Panel  
2013-2014***

**PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- To report on the activities of the Fostering Service during 2013/2014
- To review the work of the Fostering Panel
- To identify priorities for 2014/15

**BACKGROUND**

Local Authorities are required under the Children Act 1989 Section 17 (6) as amended by the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to provide accommodation for children in need who require it as a result of:

- There being no person with parental responsibility for them
- Their being lost or abandoned
- Their care is being prevented for whatever reason from providing them with suitable accommodation

All Fostering Services are governed by the Fostering Regulations and National Minimum Standards 2011. This framework outlines the minimum requirements and standards with which a Fostering Service is expected to comply and against which they are inspected by Ofsted under the new single inspection framework, *The Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers* (April 2014)

The Dudley Fostering Service was last inspected in October 2012 and was given an 'Adequate' judgement.

**EVALUATION OF PROGRESS 2013/2014**

**Placements/Matching**

Nationally the numbers of Looked After children are increasing and this trend has been reflected in Dudley. As of the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 there were 757 children Looked After, with year on year growth reflecting a 39% increase since March 2009 (543 children Looked After). The majority of looked after children within Dudley are accommodated with foster carers with only a small number of children placed in residential settings.

As at the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014 we also had 100 children who will not be returning home, for whom permanency through long term fostering has been identified as the Care Plan. These children need to be matched to existing carers or new families found for them. At the end of the year, two additional staff were appointed to concentrate on this aspect of our work and a new policy framework has been devised to ensure that

these children are either matched to their existing carers or have families found for them in a timely manner (12 month time frame). There are also a significant number of young people in foster care for whom alternatives such as Special Guardianship or a Residence Order may be an appropriate outcome rather than remaining looked after. The Service will aim to promote alternative care with these carers as appropriate.

In addition, we have a number of young people who are approaching their 18<sup>th</sup> Birthday for whom remaining with their former Foster Carers is a matter of choice and which we would wish to support. To this end in collaboration with the 14+ Team we have currently completed a new framework to ensure they can 'Stay Put' incorporating a consistent approach to young people in a variety of situations. In the short term however this is likely to have an impact on the availability of some carers to take further placements until these young people have moved on.

The service whilst it has attracted new carers over the year has not been able to grow at a pace which can sufficiently meet the increased demand for placements. Therefore to ensure effective matching and maintain good placement stability 277 children have had to be placed externally with 236 placed in Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) and 37 placed in residential provision. An additional 2 children were placed in residential schools, one child was placed for a residential assessment and one young person was placed in a secure unit.

Dudley along with 6 other Regional Authorities is part of a Fostering Framework Agreement in relation to placements. There are over 40 independent providers signed up to the agreement, which in effect set a pricing structure for the commissioning of independent fostering placements. The placements are procured on a spot purchase basis and dependent on availability, allows the Authority to select placements appropriate to individual need against a pre-arranged price. When the framework went live in April 2011 the Directorate saved almost £259,000 by transferring costs to the cheaper rates offered on existing placements. At the outset we had 119 external placements, we now have 242. Since the contract commenced there have been no increases in the charging for placements offered by providers within the framework therefore this is continuing to provide significant savings to the Authority.

The increased demand for placements is not restricted to Dudley, with many local authorities finding themselves with a lack of sufficient placements within internal resources. In Dudley we have had a significant demand for specialist placements for large sibling groups and we have identified through our analysis of the Looked After children population that there have been specific pressure points within the looked after children population with regard to new admissions. The largest demand this year for placements has come from the need for placements for children aged 0-4.

## **Flipside**

The Fostering Service continues to provide a therapeutic approach to fostering through Flipside who provide placements for a number of highly complex young people within the Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care Model (MTFC) and in addition support a large number of mainstream and family and Friends carers through the highly successful Keeping Foster Carers Trained and Support Programmes (KEEP) (See App 1.1). Both of these programme are highly regarded evidence based interventions which have been promoted by the DfE for 10 years. Dudley was an early adopter of both of these successful programmes.

KEEP is a 16 session Positive Parenting Training Programme (20 weeks KEEP Safe) aimed at Mainstream Foster Carers and Family and Friends Carers in order to improve their skills and resilience when looking after challenging children. The

programmes are based on Social Learning Theory, Attachment Theory and Brain Science and delivers core principles through providing carers with a training group that offers them both practical skills and support. The main aim of this is to provide foster carers with the confidence to use new behaviour management strategies to bring about behavioural change for children and young people.

### **Family and Friends Fostering**

The approval of Family and Friends (Connected Persons) carers is increasingly seen as a placement of choice for many children. Clearly if children can secure placements within their wider family and friends networks this has significant benefits for them. Panel approved 30 Family and Friends households during this year with a further 20 partially completed at the year end.

Many requests for the assessments of Family and Friends Carers are directed through Care Proceedings by the courts. The Fostering Service has had to adjust to new Court timetables for Care Proceedings. This has meant the sourcing of assessors at an earlier stage in the process. Additionally, the Courts are insisting on shorter timescales for completion of them, which is not in line with the Fostering Regulations (16 weeks) and causes additional pressures.

Dudley provides ongoing support and training to Family and Friends Carers as well as remuneration which is on a par with mainstream carers (without a fee element) and is also in line with national policy direction in relation to equity of treatment for Family and Friends Carers.

To ensure that our decision making processes around Initial Viability Assessments are as realistic and as comprehensive as possible, a high level of liaison between the Fostering Service and the fieldwork Social Work teams is required to ensure the application of National Minimum Standards to Family and Friends situations.

### **Recruitment**

The Service works diligently to recruit new carers and has an annual recruitment plan. All new mainstream carers are offered a fee on full approval in line with all Local Authorities in the West Midlands and Independent Fostering Agencies which makes the Service more competitive in terms of its ability to attract carers.

This Fostering Service had 13 carers approved at Panel during this year and aims to recruit a further 20 during 2014-2015. We do have a loyal though aging profile of Foster Carers, many of whom are likely to retire in the next 2-3 years which is a cause for concern.

Indeed 16 caring households were deregistered this year due mainly to resignation (9) and retirement (3) with one set of carers becoming adopters and another moving to an IFA. Two further carers were deregistered due to failing to meeting the Fostering Standards.

Currently 2 Supervising Fostering Social Workers take the lead on recruitment of Foster Carers with the remainder of the Team offering support at recruitment events which are held regularly throughout the year. We annually participate in the British Agency for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) publicity campaign 'Fostering Fortnight'.

Effective recruitment of carers will remain a challenge for the Service in the year ahead.

### **Training**

The Fostering Service has focussed on ways to improve the number of carers undertaking the Children's Workforce Development Standards (now Training and Development Standards) As of 31 March 2014, a further 94 individual carers had completed their Children's Development Standards course. This figure includes Family and Friends carers.

Training is an important facet of the support that Dudley offers to its Foster Carers. A comprehensive programme of mandatory training to meet the National Minimum Standards 2011 is delivered in addition to specific training which particular carers may require to undertake their particular responsibilities.

Furthermore when assessments are undertaken prior to approval a plan is in place to ensure that work is completed during the assessment that will contribute to the T&D standards portfolio following approval ensuring that the standards are completed in a timely manner (within the prescribed time frame). We still however have some carers who have been approved for some years who have not managed to complete their portfolios.

### **Placement Planning/Delegated Authority**

The Fostering Service continues to arrange initial Placement Planning Meetings within 5 days of a child being placed (in an emergency placement) and also promotes the completion of the Delegated Authority process. Delegated Authority is part of the Placement Agreement Meeting which aims to provide clarity over the areas of responsibility for a Looked After child and attempts to 'normalise' the placement experience for them. The Delegated Authority is thereafter reviewed within the Looked After Children's review process at 6 monthly intervals.

### **Foster Carer Reviews**

The review process implemented in 2011 continues to work well and is seen as a robust way of assuring the quality of placements. It was particularly recognised as an area of good practice by Ofsted in the last inspection. During 2013-2014 227 reviews were independently chaired, however the Service is significantly under resourced in terms of IRO capacity to chair these reviews and many have to be chaired by through sourcing external provision. Unless capacity increases there is a risk that reviews may not be undertaken within the required time frame thereby leading to a breach of the regulations.

Within the review process children and young people are actively involved in providing feedback about the placements they live in and the care they receive and this is seen as integral to decision making about their care.

All first reviews are presented to Fostering Panel (14) as are reviews following Concerns or Allegations (2). A further 46 reviews were presented to the Quality Assurance meeting which is held bi-monthly

The Independent Reviewing Officer for Fostering prepares an annual report for the Fostering Service summarising the emergent practice issues arising from the reviews she chairs (this year a total of 85).

### **Black Country Collaborative Working**

Work has commenced with the Black Country Authorities (Walsall, Wolverhampton, and Sandwell) in relation to Skills to Foster training which is working well and pools resources.

Proposals were made around joint marketing and recruitment which would develop a Black Country brand around fostering similar to the one which is already in place with regard to adoption in the Black Country. Regrettably little progress has been made primarily due to variable commitment across the Black Country Authorities. Clarification is being sought regarding the level of commitment that can be secured from the 4 Assistant Directors of the Black Country Authorities to determine if this is something to which we still want to commit resources.

## **Conclusions**

There are currently a number of challenges faced by the Fostering Service:

- the continuing rise in the number of Looked After children and the pressure on placements as a result;
- the aging profile of our existing Foster Carers;
- the continuing demand for assessments of Family and Friends (Connected Person) often within short time frames;
- Matching and family finding for a significant number of children requiring permanent fostering.
- The shortfall in IRO capacity to undertake Foster Carer Reviews leading to the risk that reviews will go out of time and breach the Regulations
- Completion of the outstanding Training and Development Standards for all historically approved carers.

## **Action Plan For 2014/15**

- Develop and implement a recruitment strategy for permanent carers and address the needs of those children requiring permanency in long term fostering placements through the provision of placements.
- Promote the take up of Special Guardianship Orders/Residence Orders with those Foster Carers and young people for whom this is an appropriate permanency option
- Provide a consistent response to those young people reaching 18yrs of age who wish to remain with their former foster carers through implementing the new 'Staying Put' policy framework.
- Recruit 20 new mainstream Foster Carers for all age ranges.
- Continue to provide a full range of Multi Dimensional Treatment programmes and deliver the KEEP safe programme for carers of adolescents and KEEP for carers of younger aged children 3-6yrs
- Continue to promote treatment foster care through leading on and acting as mentor in developing MTFC across the 'Black Country' locality.
- Develop our activities to capture the 'voice of the child' more effectively and continue to work with the Children in Care Council in the development of our service.
- Improve activities to identify themes from Foster Carer Reviews to influence service delivery and improve outcomes for young people in foster care.
- Continue to aim for closer collaborative working across the region seeking opportunities through the Fostering Consortium for joint training, joined up services and joint recruitment

- Keep under review the allocation of roles and responsibilities within the Service to ensure that the allocation of resources is targeted effectively and the identification of future resource requirements is identified.
- Seek additional IRO resources to ensure that all Foster Carer Reviews are conducted within the statutory time frame.

**Signed:**

Fostering Service Manager ..... Date

Fostering Panel Chair ..... Date