

## CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD – 18 January 2021

<b>Title of paper:</b>	Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention	
<b>Director:</b>	Helen Blackman – Director, Children’s Integrated Services	<b>Wards affected:</b> All
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<b>Other colleagues who have provided input:</b>	Sarah Bartlett - Principle Fostering Recruitment Manager. Bala Gurusamy- Principle Fostering Manager Christina Godfrey - Principle Fostering Manager	
<b>Date of consultation with Portfolio Holder</b>	04 January 2021	
<b>Relevant Council Plan Key Theme:</b>		
Nottingham People		<b>X</b>
Living in Nottingham		
Growing Nottingham		
Respect for Nottingham		
Serving Nottingham Better		
<b>Summary of issues (including benefits to citizen’s/service users):</b>		
This report addresses the strategies for the recruitment and retention opportunities of foster carers.		
<b>Recommendation:</b>		
1	It is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Board notes the recruitment and retention performance of the Fostering Service and the activities undertaken by the service to recruit and support foster carers.	

### **1 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS**

According to the National Charity Fostering Network:

- 57,380 children were living with foster families on 31 March 2020.
- This is 72 per cent of the 80,080 children in care looked after away from home.
- There are around 42,125 foster families in England.
- Every year thousands of new foster families are needed in England.

### **2 BACKGROUND (INCLUDING OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION)**

2.1 The City had 680 children in their care as recorded on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020. These are the most vulnerable children in the City, some of them known to services for some time, and many with complex needs. The majority of these children (464) are placed with foster carers. The Department recognises that if children are unable to live safely with birth parents or their extended family, then a setting that offers the experience of family life is best. This is what a placement with a foster carer offers.

- 2.2 The Department places most children in our care with foster carers. We continue to strive to place many more of our children with our own in-house mainstream carers. In terms of costs of placements we have increased our approved foster carers numbers to the point where we are now providing City Council foster placements for 52.4% of the required placements (recorded at 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020).

We continue to maintain this increase, in spite of the challenges presented by Covid 19 in approving carers and placing them in house. Many of our carers are either older carers or in the vulnerable category and have health concerns. We continue to work hard to further reduce the reliance on Independent Fostering Agencies, with an increasing number of new fostering households in the younger age ranges.

- 2.3 Placing children within families and connected persons carers have increased at a fast pace. There is an increase of more than 300% compared to 2018 where 28 placements was made, in 2020 this has increased to 68 placements.
- 2.4 Many of our foster carers live in the City or the County, we prefer to recruit more carers living locally so that our children have more opportunities to continue relationships with friends and have the option to remain at the same school if appropriate. We prefer to place children and young people who need foster care with our own carers rather than with an Independent Fostering Agency, which may be further away and increases the risk of disrupting established relationships. Independent Fostering Agencies also incur a much higher cost to the city council as we have to pay the additional Independent Fostering Agency fee.
- 2.5 For those children who are unable to live with their birth families, it is important where possible for them to retain close links and many will continue to have regular contact with their families. It is more economically viable for support and contact to be maintained with local foster carers. A foster placement with our own local foster carers can help the child to have a better quality contact. With less travel time required the child is often less anxious.
- 2.6 Statutory visits by the child's Social Worker and the Supervising Social Workers are more efficient when the child is placed with local City Council foster carers. Communication is often easier for the child's Social Worker and the Fostering Supervising Social Worker, because they work for the City Council. Any successful placement is dependent on good communication between the staff concerned and to be able to get accurate information quickly is key to giving all those involved the best support possible.

This will definitely help the child feel that we care deeply about them and will work hard to ensure they get the best possible service. A successful placement needs to be supported well. The support to the placement is easier to put in place when all professionals work in the same department, as support from CAMHS, the Virtual School, and Targeted Support are all delivered from the same Council or linked Agencies.

- 2.7 Connected Persons foster placement, will be granted temporarily approval by the Head of Service following the completion of a positive viability assessment. The assessments are completed and presented to fostering panel within 16 weeks of placement date, where this is not possible, a further extension of 8 weeks is requested to keep the placement regulated. Supervising Social Workers support all Connected carers from the date we receive the referral from the child Social Work team.

Connected carers are given a specific handbook information pertaining to connected foster placement, Special Guardianship Order/Child Arrangement Order. Carers are supported with weekly fostering allowance and equipment's/furniture's for children to settle in. Connected carers are offered Skills to foster training which is condensed to one day. We also have a support group exclusively for connected carers. All our connected carers have access to independent support from the Fostering Network. Majority of our connected carers will opt for Special Guardianship Order (SGO) as part of the final outcome of care proceedings in the court leading to permanency for children and an exit from care. Carers are supported with independent legal advice to consider their options.

- 2.8 Carers choosing to remain long-term connected carer are provided with the same level of support as mainstream foster carer in accordance with National Minimum Standard of Fostering.

### RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

- 2.9 The City Council's recruitment strategy is aimed at recruiting more local foster carers and retaining existing foster carers for a longer period. Currently the average number of years a household fosters is 8. We seek to increase this to enable children who are placed to have the opportunity to stay longer if that's the right plan for them. We currently have two 0.5 dedicated Customer Service Officer posts for Fostering. They are the point of contact for any prospective foster carer from the application stage through to approval.

Every month Information events are held on line, broadcast from Loxley House, for anyone thinking about Fostering. Prior to the Covid restrictions these events were face to face and were always attended by a foster carer and members of the Fostering Team who answered any queries from guests interested in fostering, and to share their own experiences of fostering. Covid restrictions required us to create a safe and effective new way to continue to recruit foster carers and we moved our events on line. These regular events are not the same as a face to face event, but we still share films on the fostering role, and have a Q and A session that helps potential applicants consider all the information that hopefully leads to them making a request for a visit from the Recruitment Team. Enquiries have continued to come via this method.

- 2.10 We continue to have video clips of carers and young people who have been in foster care presenting their views. This is the most powerful part of any event, bringing to life the realities of fostering, the positives and the challenges. Potential applicants hear directly from young people in foster care, as well as receiving advice about what makes a good foster carer.

We have increased our on line presence and promote Fostering Services on Facebook, Twitter and on the Nottingham City Council website. The web pages are regularly reviewed as we recognise that more and more citizens research Fostering on-line before making contact with the department. Covid has presented us with challenges in terms of recruitment, but we have responded creatively and we continue to receive enquiries, arrange virtual visits and process applications.

- 2.11 May 2018 saw the first Fostering Sunday, which was when many churches across the city highlighted the need for more foster carers in the city as part of their sermons and other activities. This was part of the 100 Homes campaign, a joint initiative between the City Council and Nottingham City Prayer, a group of Nottingham Church

Leaders. Nottingham City Prayer have pledged to recruit 100 fostering households for the City Council from local churches over a 3-year period. The second Fostering Sunday was held in May 2019, and the intention is that it becomes an ongoing annual fixture in the calendar of Nottingham.

Due to Covid 19 all church services were online, there was a mention in relation to the 100 homes campaign throughout Nottingham City Prayer churches in May 2020. Since the 2018 Fostering Sunday several Fostering information events have been held in churches around the city which have been well attended, and to date has seen 13 households being approved, with several more in the recruitment process. Two of the Fostering households recruited via the campaign to date are church leaders, one of whom is a vocal advocate for Fostering.

- 2.12 The City Council Fostering Recruitment Service are working in partnership with 100 homes / City Prayer. We have held several virtual events to promote fostering and held Q and A sessions for church members who have expressed an interest in fostering. We have part funding a post for a link worker; the role includes supporting church members in early stages of recruitment process, holding service reviews and unpicking barriers to recruitment when they arise. We are in the second year of part funding this post and thus far recruitment from the City Prayer collective has made a slow but steady start.
- 2.13 We have been working with the Indian Community Centre Association (ICCA) to highlight the need for more foster carers in the City that reflect our community. This involves the distribution of fostering literature through Gurdwaras, Temples and other institutions, plus the sharing of social media posts. The City Council is one of several LAs that are participating in a scheme to recruit more foster carers and supported lodgings providers for unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). This is being operated by Leicestershire County Council, who will assess and train any households in our area and bring them to our panel.
- 2.14 Supported Lodgings is a particular type of placement aimed at older young people and is designed to support their transition into adulthood. Barnardo's are working with Nottingham City Council to develop a needs led pathway of accommodation for care experienced young people as they move on from care. As part of this pathway, Barnardo's are using funds from a legacy left by a supporter to develop a Supported Lodgings scheme for care experienced young people in Nottingham City.
- 2.15 We are also in partnership with is the Nottingham Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Network (LGBTQ). The Fostering Recruitment Consultant was made LGBTQ Network Champion for the year, which will allow for further opportunities to promote Fostering within this community. Our direct work in 2020 has been somewhat limited as live events and festivals we would usually attend and recruit from have not taken place due to Covid restrictions in March 2020 we held one event in a city bar over a weekend, before Lockdown. We are maintaining contact with our (LGBTQ) partners who are keen to welcome us back to continue with our recruitment events.
- 2.16 In addition to the activity set out above there is a range of on-going work as we respond to the need to work more and more on line. This has included further development of social media content, which resulted in several posts going viral. The most successful of these in terms of impact was a short video of a foster carer telling a very powerful story involving taking a foster child to the beach for the first time. This was shared over 200 times and was seen by over 30,000 people. Prior to the Covid

restrictions the Fostering Recruitment Team would regularly attend local events such as the Riverside Festival, and Pride to promote Fostering. We look forward to resuming our face to face activities at these wonderful events.

2.17 The capacity of the Fostering recruitment team has grown enabling us to create a stronger more effective process that has already improved the journey for applicants and has started to enhance our reputation. A target of a net gain of 15 fostering households was set for 2018-19. We have exceeded this, with a net gain of 20 households, with 37 approvals set against 17 resignations.

In 2018-19 the City Council recruited 37 fostering households, which is the highest figure of any local authority across the Midlands. In 2019-20 a further 23 households were approved, and in 2020-21 at least 30 households are projected to be approved, subject to panel capacity and a solution for fostering medicals. Compared to other similar local authorities, fostering recruitment is performing exceptionally well. The initial recruitment marketing budget of £10,000 was reduced to £5,000 half way through the financial year 2020-21, yet the number of households approved still exceeds many authorities who have significantly higher marketing budgets.

### Training

2.18 As part of the recruitment process under Covid restrictions we have moved our Skills to Foster Training on line. We have condensed the 3 days to 2.5 days and held smaller groups to enable applicants to take part and be supported through group work, feedback and identifying specific learning needs for some applicants. This information is then shared with the assessor completing the form of assessment and they can then follow up and direct applicants to further reading and on line training. We have commissioned therapeutic parenting training that has contributed to the applicants developing new parenting strategies that some foster children will benefit from. Feedback in the past 9 months is positive and while the training groups are smaller and therefore not as cost effective, the evaluation is positive and the applicants report their skills have been increased significantly having had the training. Going forward we plan to continue to run Skills to Foster Training virtually every month until such time when we can safely return to our face to face training in Loxley House.

### Recruitment performance

Month	Number of Enquiries	Assessment Starts		Placements In-House	Placements With IFAs	% In-House vs IFAS
Dec-20	21	2	3			
Nov-20	11	2	2	243	221	52.4% v 47.6%
Oct-20	31	4	2	243	212	53.4% v 46.6%
Sep-20	18	5	0	248	219	53.1% v 46.8%
Aug-20	18	2	1	253	218	53.7% v 46.3%
Jul-20	10	6	2	268	219	55% v 45%
Jun-20	16	4	5	274	222	55.2% v 44.7%
May-20	32	5	2	276	215	56.2% v 43.7%
Apr-20	12	2	4	270	215	55.6% v 44.3%
Mar-20	18	5	0	265	213	55.4% v 44.5%
Feb-20	22	1	3	260	206	57.8% v 44.2%
Jan-20	34	4	2	249	201	55.3% v 44.6%

## Risks

- 2.19 We have experienced considerable barriers in regard to arranging and completing medicals, these are a statutory requirement for any prospective foster carer. The Government did recognise this and for a period of time we were able to accept health self-assessment that were then sent on to our medical adviser to comment on in terms of the applicant's fitness to foster. These arrangements ended on 25/9/20.
- 2.20 The Fostering Recruitment Team are now facing the risk of losing potential foster carers, due primarily to the delay in completing medicals with GP's not having capacity due to Covid. We are in the process of compiling a list of contracted independent medical assessors, who must be a qualified GP, to perform our medicals in a timely and effective manner. We have secured a budget for this service, and are hoping that this will be successfully implemented in the coming weeks.

## Retention Strategy

- 2.21 We have a well-established, dedicated and experienced team of Supervising Social Workers. Every foster carer has their own Supervising Social Worker who regularly visits them, and who they can contact at any time regarding their Fostering role. We are in the process of increasing the team of Supervising Social Workers to ensure foster carers are supported and reflect our success at recruiting more internal carers. Our foster carers are regularly and formally reviewed where any changes to their status can be discussed and agreed
- 2.22. We have introduced a Buddy scheme, offering peer mentoring by experienced foster carers, foster carers tell us that this is a much-valued service that is growing steadily. New carers tell us that they have been helped by the buddy and are growing in confidence because of it.
- 2.23 The Fostering team have developed a Therapeutic Support Team. The Therapeutic Support Team provides therapeutic based interventions, support, and advice, recognising that caring for children can feel overwhelming at times and sometimes patterns of behaviour and the way families get on together can become very stuck. They offer monthly consultation slots for foster carers and professional and also offer home visits.
- 2.24 There are six-weekly Fostering Business meetings that alternate between day and evening sessions. These meetings are now being run successfully virtually. The meetings offer all our foster carers the opportunity to meet with Senior Managers within the Department, and for the Department to share current issues and concerns, and consult in relation to new initiatives. The Virtual School regularly attend business meetings to address any issues in relation to education that carers may have. Other services that attend periodically are Independent Reviewing Officers and the Placement Service.
- 2.25 In addition to internal services partner agencies also attend business meetings. This year the NSPCC attend the Business meeting, in relation to work they are doing with life story work for children in foster care. Life story work is important for children who are in foster care for some time to help them maintain a clear understanding of their life history. We have also had presentations from the service that provides advocacy and Independent Visitor schemes.

2.26 We are currently reviewing and updated our training programme for 2021 which all training course will be run virtually. We are also moving towards supporting social workers to support training session in groups as well as on a 121 basis to develop a more bespoke training package. Where we have received positive comments from foster carers, we will run a course the following year, or more than once during the year.

2.27 We pay for all our carers to be members of the Fostering Network where they can receive the latest information relative to developments in Fostering, and they also access the services of the Fostering Network Advice and Mediation Worker.

2.28 Works Perks is an employee benefits scheme where staff can choose from over 6000 lifestyle discounts, we have recently extended this to include foster carers. This can include discounts at well-known shops, cinema, discounted holidays and travel, and local offers from businesses. We consulted with foster carers, and most foster carers have received their ID badges to access the scheme.

### **3 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED IN MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS**

3.1 None.

### **4 FINANCE COLLEAGUE COMMENTS**

4.1 None.

### **5 LEGAL AND PROCUREMENT COLLEAGUE COMMENTS**

5.1 None.

### **6 STRATEGIC ASSETS & PROPERTY COLLEAGUE COMMENTS**

6.1 None.

### **7 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

7.1 Not required as the report does not contain proposals or financial decisions.

### **8 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS OTHER THAN PUBLISHED WORKS OR THOSE DISCLOSING CONFIDENTIAL OR EXEMPT INFORMATION**

8.1 None.

### **9 PUBLISHED DOCUMENTS REFERRED TO IN COMPILING THIS REPORT**

9.1 None.