



**CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 13 JUNE 2016**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY
SERVICES**

**LEICESTERSHIRE FOSTERING AGENCY
QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PERFORMANCE REPORT
FOR THE PERIOD 1ST APRIL 2015 TO 31ST MARCH 2016**

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to present the Committee with an update on the activity and performance of the Fostering Agency.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. Leicestershire County Council is responsible for a Local Authority Fostering Agency. It undertakes statutory responsibilities relating to Fostering. This report is from the Leicestershire County Council Fostering Agency.
3. Under the National Minimum Standards (NMS), (25.7) all Fostering agencies are required to provide one six month and one annual report to the Executive¹ regarding the activity and work of the Fostering Agency and Fostering Panel.
4. This report is the annual version and provides an update on recent developments and challenges within the Fostering Service for the period 1st April 2015 to 31st March 2016.

Executive Summary

5. As of March 31st 2016 there were 466 children in our care. The average care population size during 15/16 was 483 children.
 6. The Fostering Service has 209 mainstream and kinship carers approved (some connected carers are temporarily approved).
 7. In this period there were 146 children placed with in-house mainstream carers, and 80 children placed with kinship carers.
 8. 113 children were placed in Independent Fostering Agency placements (IFA's)
 9. On the 31st March 2016 40 children were living in independent children's homes
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10. In the year we approved 20 new foster carers at panel. 8 retired, 2 adopted children in placement, and 1 was deregistered by the authority.
11. In the same period, there were 28 new kinship fostering households approved.
12. The Fostering Service has been challenged by commercial factors in recruiting new foster carers to work for the authority.
13. This has resulted in a rate of attrition around 8% further impacted by the ageing population of our current cohort of foster carers.
14. A clear plan to recruit more carers is underway and in continuous development to ensure the authority responds to commercial factors in a timely and appropriate way.
15. Staffing issues during the period of report have occasionally led to foster carers reporting that they feel unsupported. This was addressed in January 2016 via an urgent action plan and early indications are evidencing an improvement in this area.

Background/Current Position

16. As of March 31st 2016 there were 466 children in our care. The average care population size during 15/16 was 483 children.
17. This is a year on year decrease of 15 children for the same period 2014/15 (LAC numbers of 481).
18. The Fostering Service has 209 mainstream and kinship carers approved (some connected carers are temporarily approved). *This is a year on year increase of 19 households.*
19. Of these 209 there were 134 mainstream fostering households, and 77 kinship fostering households.
20. In this period there were 146 children placed with in-house mainstream carers, and 80 children placed with kinship carers.
21. 113 children were placed in Independent Fostering Agency placements (IFA's). *This is an increase of 2 on the same period 2014/2015.* In house placements are currently full to capacity; all carers require monthly supervision, whereby each child is discussed in detail by the Fostering Supervising Social Workers to ensure that the foster carer is supported to meet that child's needs. Where a child is placed in an IFA placement, this work is carried out by the IFA's own social workers. Both elements of carer supervision are conducted in collaboration with the Leicestershire CC Child's Social Worker/Team.
22. In this period 5 young people were living in Leicestershire's two residential homes. *Unchanged from 14/15.*
23. In this period 40 children were living in independent children's homes. *Unchanged from 14/15.*

24. In addition to the 45 children and young people in residential care, an additional 12 are certified disabled.
25. In addition to the 12 above, 3 disabled children receive a disabled respite service.
26. In this period 24 young people aged 16+ were living in supported lodgings. *An increase of 2 from 14/15.*
27. In this period 28 children were in adoption placements. *An increase of 5 from 14/15.*
28. In this period 18 young people were placed with parents.
29. In this period 9 young people were placed under Staying Put arrangements.
30. A planned formal restructure of the Fostering Service was implemented in April 2015 and enabled the services to respond more flexibly to recruitment and to targets to meet increase in-house provision to meet the expected increased number of children and young people who need to be in local authority care.
31. The National Minimum Standards for Fostering (2011) give a six month time scale for a fostering assessment to be completed from application to presentation at panel.
32. In the period April 1st to March 31st 2016, 35 mainstream assessments were started. 18 progressed to stage II and were approved at fostering panel.
33. Of the total LAC population approximately 55% reside with LCC approved family based carers (based on average LAC population of 483). We aim to increase this to 65% in 16/17.

Foster Carer and Fostering Profile

34. In February 2015 a Business Analysts worked with the Fostering Service to bring together a range of information to better understand the profile of placements and foster carers. The key findings from these reports are listed below:
 - i. The majority of foster carers work at skill level 3
 - ii. A third of foster carers are aged 61 and over
 - iii. A third of foster carers are either above the default retirement age or within five years of this, however a third of foster carers are more than 15 years from the default retirement age
 - iv. The majority of LAC placements are male (57%) against female (43%)
 - v. A fifth of LAC are within 2 years of turning 18
 - vi. The majority of LAC placements (85%) are from one ethnicity of "White/British"
 - vii. Almost three quarters of external commission placements are classified as "agency fostering" (73%)
 - viii. The majority placements (70%) are made with a group of eight suppliers and the majority of spend (80%) are made with a group of eighteen suppliers

- ix. Contract management has increased by 255% from 38 placements to 135 placements within four years with a value of £8.7m in 2014
35. Over the summer of 2015 a consultation and development company called iMPower worked with the Fostering Service to better understand the priority commissioning areas. The following is a summary of their findings and 'outputs':
- The analysis identified an imperative and opportunity to arrest the decline in in-house fostering capacity, increase placement share and achieve better use of resources
 - Doing so will require an investment in the service, and a concerted and coordinated effort to deliver focussed changes
 - With the support of the LCC team and foster carers, agreement was been achieved on the priority development areas and detailed plans have been drawn up, including resource inputs
36. The reforms proposed are centred on the needs of carers and those who may become carers. The diagram below provides an overview of the findings:

Carer engagement – headline findings (see full report for more details)



Kinship Carers (Formerly Known as 'Connected Carers')

37. Family and Friends foster care is a formal arrangement where the child is looked after by the Local Authority and placed with a relative, friend or connected person. 'Relative of Friend' is defined as a: grandparent, brother, sister, uncle or aunt (whether of the full blood or by marriage), step-parent, or friend of the child.
38. A 'Connected Person' is anyone who has a pre-existing connection to a child through their extended network. This may be someone who knows the child in a more professional capacity such as a child-minder, a teacher, a youth worker, although these are not exclusive categories (National Minimum Standards and Fostering Regulations 2013).
39. This case law led to an increase in the formality of assessment of a large group of carers in Leicestershire and subsequent directives from the family courts to complete assessments in shrinking timescales has had a significant impact on assessment and supervisory capacity in the Fostering Service.
40. To address this capacity issue, a dedicated 'Connected Persons' unit called the Kinship Team was created and sits within the Fostering Adoption and Placements Service. This team aims to provide a more focused service in a more timely and consistent manner.
41. Issues relating to Leicestershire family court expectations regarding completion of assessments in shrinking timescales will be raised at the Family Justice Board.

Emotional Permanence

42. Special Guardianship was introduced as a new permanence option for children in December 2005. It provides a legally secure foundation for building a permanent relationship between the child and their special guardian, while preserving the legal link between the child and their birth family.
43. 'Choices for children and Young People' is Leicestershire's placement and sufficiency strategy for children and young people in care (2013-2015) and is supplemented/updated by the Market position statement for 2015-16. This strategy sets out Leicestershire County Council's ambition to secure emotional attachment, physical stability and long term commitment for the children and young people that come into our care.
44. Central to this vision is exploring all options to keep children and young people within their family networks through support arrangements and formal care proceedings where order options include Special Guardianship or Residence Orders. We continue to explore this as a possibility in all cases, and can find creative ways to support this move into permanence for our looked after children.
45. However, a financial risk analysis of the growing cohort of special guardians is underway in order to understand the future draw on the authority's limited resources.

Development and Training

46. Staff development and their engagement in the development of fostering services is a key priority and will help to deliver improved outcomes for children. In order to ensure the Fostering Service is working consistently with the Locality Teams the Growing Safety methodology is undertaken in all of the work we do.
47. The Head of Service and Service Manager have scheduled a regular audit of foster carer supervision records to determine the baseline of use of Signs of Safety by the supervising social workers. The outcome of the audit will be to determine what developmental activity/training is needed to ensure Signs of Safety is used meaningfully to inform the support and training needs of foster carers to best meet the outcomes of children and young people in care.
48. In this year, Signs of Safety will be a fully embedded form of practice in the Placements Service.
49. The foster carers, kinship and short breaks Personal Training and Developmental Plan was recently updated and can be found online at: <http://ow.ly/BXpA300Qhjq>
50. The actions arising from this audit and other activity e.g. foster carer feedback will be used to update the Personal Training and Developmental Plan for 2016-17. This work is led by the Fostering Adoption and Placement's Training Coordinator who was introduced to the service as part of the remodelling in April 2015.
51. There continues to be support to the Placement Commissioning unit within FAP from the Commissioning Support Team, with a renewed focus on commissioning planning for cohorts of children e.g. 16+ young people, contract management and use of contract and contract management specialists to inform practice.
52. The Regional Procurement Framework for Commissioned Placements went live in February 2016. Early indications are encouraging. The second stage of the project, a move to using online tendering processes will commence in May 2016.

Ambition:

To implement the East Midlands Regional framework and enable Leicestershire County Council to source agency placements within procurement regulations

Key Proposal Outputs:

- Agency placements are sourced on the framework
- Where more than one match is identified, child Social Worker to decide within shortlisted match provision
- Direct Awards are only made if no suitable provision is available within the framework
- Matched framework provision cannot be refused as direct awards are only to be used as an exception

Role & Functions:

- Placement Commissioning Team to source provision within the Framework based on placement outcomes
- Child's Social Worker to identify preference where more than two shortlisted provisions are available
- Mini Competitions and Direct Awards to be reviewed monthly by Placement Commissioning Team Manager

Strategic Alignment & Interdependencies:

- Corporate Commissioning strategy
- Partnership with Regional Framework local authorities

Strategic Governance:

Stakeholders: Nicci Collins, Andrew Logie, Liz Perfect, Chris Nerini, Sarah Wilson, Maria Hunt
Proposal Sponsor: Walter McCulloch, Neil Hanney

Proposal Description:

- The East Midlands Regional Framework has been running for the past four years with five local authorities, Leicestershire County Council joined the framework this year and now is a partner with the eight East Midland local authorities
- All placements that require agency provision will be sourced from the East Midlands Regional Framework, where Leicestershire will follow a process of mini competition to achieve the best match for our children and young people and a cost effective price
- Where placements are identified as matching the outcomes, and where a shortlist of more than one provider is available, the decision on which placement within the shortlist will be with the child's Social Worker
- Where a placement match cannot be identified within the East Midlands Regional Framework, the Family Placement Commissioning Team will identify a match "off frame work" and undertake a direct award on behalf of the child's Social Worker

Benefits to be achieved are:

- Compliance with procurement rules and regulations
- Improved outcomes for our looked after children and young people
- Improved matched provision within agency placements
- Improved value for money with agencies
- Improved supplier management
- Improved recording and reporting of agency placements and needs of our looked after children
- Greater market management and greater placement choice in time

Development of the Service

53. Priorities for this period have included:

- i. The implementation of the new structure
- ii. Recruitment to vacancies following the restructure
- iii. Management cover during this period
- iv. Improving contract management
- v. Improving and implementing contract negotiation
- vi. Recruitment and assessment
- vii. Preparing for the implementation of the Regional Framework
- viii. A period of consolidation and 'back to basics' in business as usual operations.

54. The 2016/17 mid-year statutory report will provide an overview of the Service Developmental Plan and will highlight new priorities.

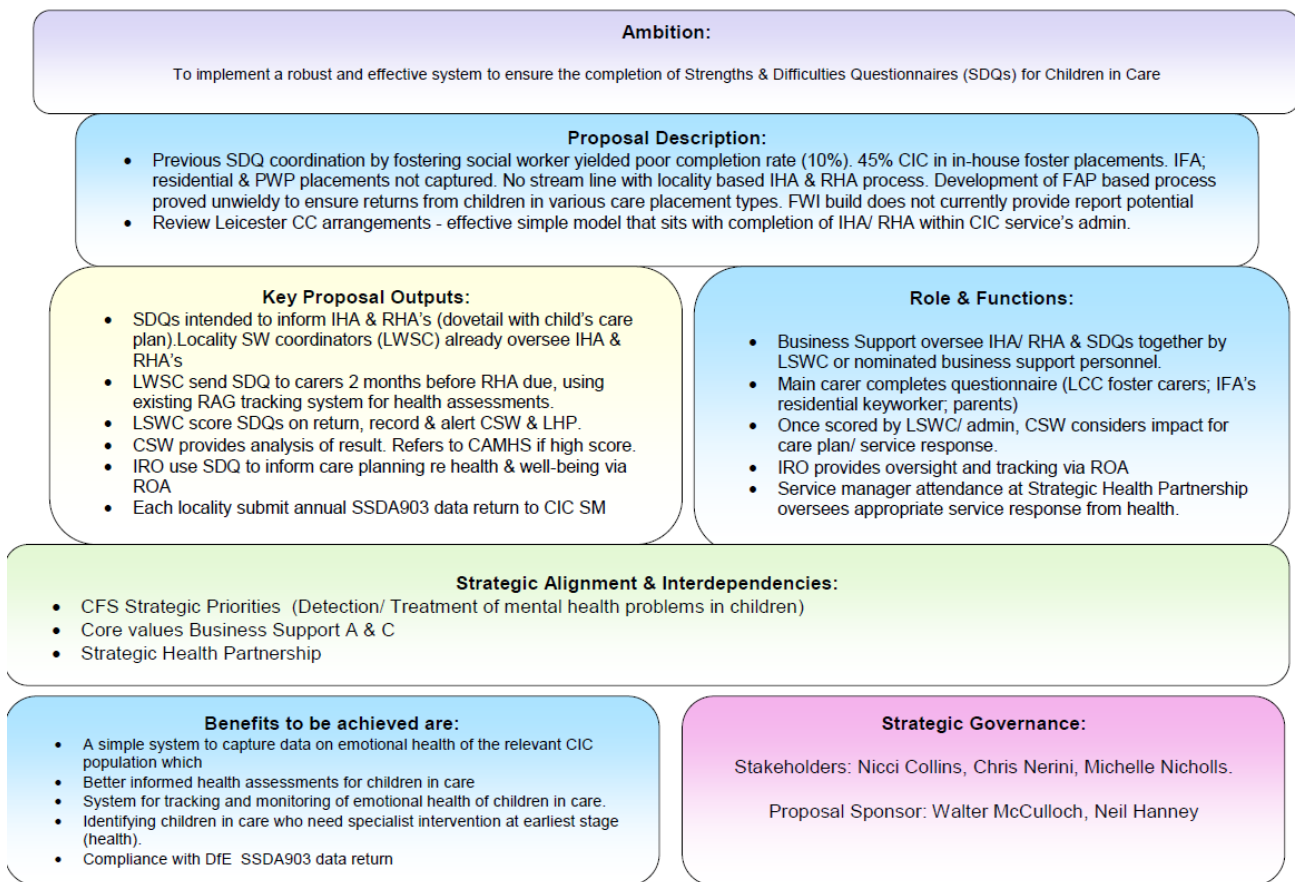
Agency Decision Maker (ADM)

55. The Agency Decision Maker is the person within a fostering service and an adoption agency who makes decisions on the basis of recommendations made by the Fostering Panel (in relation to a fostering service) and the Adoption Panel (in relation to an adoption agency).

56. The ADM is a statutory social care function. They are responsible for ensuring that the basis of decision making for children or young people's care plans is sound and that principle of quality assurance to the process of panel and the decision making processes apply.

57. In Leicestershire County Council, the ADM is a dedicated role.

58. During the period of this report the ADM has undertaken this function in relation to individual children's care planning decisions. She has determined that there is some confusion about the role and the authority of the role and to this end has produced an ADM Guidance on a Page:



This overview has been shared with C&FS staff to promote understanding of the role.

Resource Implications

59. Consideration of the MTFs is incorporated in the annual budget setting exercise whereby the authority's plan to meet its sufficiency duty is financed.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

60. None

Officer(s) to Contact

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Equality and Human Rights Implications

61. The Leicestershire and Rutland Adoption Agency has been recently commended by Stonewall for its inclusive recruitment stance, particularly with regard to same sex adopters.

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