



## **CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE -**

**7 NOVEMBER 2023**

## **LEICESTERSHIRE FOSTERING AGENCY STATUTORY REPORT 2022-23**

### **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICE**

#### **Purpose of report**

1. The purpose of this report is to present the Committee with an overview of the activity of the Fostering Service for the period 2022 -2023.

#### **Policy Framework and Previous Decisions**

1. Under the Fostering Regulations 2015 Fostering Agencies are required to provide an annual report to the Executive to note the activity and work of the Fostering Agency (Leicestershire County Council Fostering Service). To meet this standard, the Fostering Service submits a monthly report to the Lead Member and Director and an annual report to the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
2. The full report can be found in the Appendix.

#### **Background**

3. Leicestershire County Council is responsible for a Local Authority Fostering Service, involving undertaking all statutory duties for the recruitment and retention of foster carers.
4. The Fostering Service is led by the Head of Service for Fostering, Adoption, Children in Care, and the Virtual School, and is managed by a Service Manager.
5. Within the service six key areas are supported:
  - The recruitment of Foster Carers, Supported Lodgings Hosts and Independent Visitors
  - The assessment of Foster Carers, Private Fostering, Supported Lodgings Hosts, Independent Visitors and Non-Agency Adoptions
  - The post approval Support and training of Foster Carers, Supported Lodgings Hosts, Private Foster Carers, and Independent Visitors.
  - The Fostering and Special Guardian Assessments of Kinship Carer
  - The post approval support of kinship care
  - The additional support to families through a Dedicated Placement Support Team.

## **Summary of Report**

6. The report outlines the activity from each service area. The key achievements over the year have included:
  - Approved: 16 Mainstream Foster Carers
  - Approved four Supported Lodgings Providers
  - Approved 18 Independent Visitors
  - Implemented a dedicated duty system to support carers, place more children in house and maintain 75% utilisation
  - Increased the utilisation of in-house placements compared to use of independent fostering agencies
  - Increased the capacity to assess and support independent visitors by appointing an additional worker
  - Maintained placement stability via the Dedicated Placement Support Team (DPST) working with over 71 families
  - Supported three carers to achieve a Diploma in Therapeutic parenting
  - Continued to develop the Mentoring Scheme for new and inexperienced carers. The service offered mentors to 14 carers in assessment, of which 12 accepted and will support through the assessment process and their first year of approval.
  - Continued to offer carers the right support at the right time to support placement stability for children
  - Increased numbers of Independent Visitors to provide support to children and young people - approving 18 new Independent Visitors. The total number of Independent Visitors is 68, matched to 73 young people.
  - Developed the Fostering Newsletter for potential applicants who are considering fostering now or in the future
  - Maintained excellent staff retention
  - The development of the kinship assessment team and IVA work has seen the numbers of children achieving permanency through Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) increase (total SGO achieved: 50)
  
7. The Fostering Service is managed by a Service Manager and Assistant Service Manager. These roles ensure that both recruitment and retention receive the same high-quality management oversight and service development.
  
8. Efficient ways to communicate are established, ensuring carers are given the most up to date information from the service, one of these being via a private Facebook group, which is still used to disseminate information and to share good news stories, links to key research, good practice guidance and general wellbeing.
  
9. Where appropriate, outdoor events for carers were held. The service organised two picnics which had very good attendance from all carers and the staff team, the weather stayed warm and dry, and all enjoyed the opportunities from seeing each other in person again.
  
10. Placement stability remained high and where the service recognized there were stability issues. The Service was able to quickly build a team around the child to maintain the foster home using the Dedicated Placement Support Team (DPST), Independent Visitors and working in partnership with other services such as Children in Care, Virtual School and the Assessment and Resource Team (ART) for example.

11. Older children and larger sibling groups continue to be the largest number of children requiring care.
12. Through the implementation of the Defining Children and Families for the Future (DCFSF) programme, the service has been able to look at this cohort of older young people to identify resources to maintain their living arrangements either at home or within a foster home to prevent unnecessary residential starts.
13. A number of carers skilled in caring for teenagers were taking a break from fostering due to ill health or other personal circumstances which presented additional challenges with matching.
14. Focus on achieving permanency at the earliest opportunity has seen a decrease in Court Ordered Placements (38.6) and an increase in the number of Viability Assessments for Kinship Care. With revised, clear processes in place, there has been a reduction in Regulation 24 Fostering Arrangements and subsequently approvals in Kinship Care.
15. There has been significant developmental work within Kinship Assessments including an increase in staffing to undertake more specific targeted work. This includes SGO only assessments and private SGO applications.
16. The Annual Report provides feedback from the whole service, highlighting how the service has progressed plans from last year and new targets for the forthcoming year.
17. Nationally, the recruitment of foster carers has declined with the number of potential carers progressing into assessment and approval. In addition to this, local authorities and agencies are struggling to meet the numbers coming through pre-Covid.
18. Within Leicestershire, there has also been a decline in potential applicants coming forward. Agreed approval targets had been felt to be realistic, but as the year progressed, it became apparent that numbers for approval would not meet the set targets. The target number of households was 25 but the number of households approved was 16.
19. The service has reviewed applications and can recognise challenges arising as a result of strain on the economy, Covid recovery period, investment needed in supporting Ukrainian refugees, and a national recruitment shortage. The service will continue to review all applications to identify where there have been any missed opportunities but feels confident that quality assurance processes have bought the right applications through to assessment.
20. It is anticipated that some of these challenges will continue but the fostering service is focussed on building carers to focus on the support, training available. The service will continue to set itself ambitious targets.
21. The beginning of the year commenced with a delayed foster carers recognition event, held at the King Power Stadium in May. This was an opportunity for the service to thank all mainstream foster carers, kinship foster carers and Independent Visitors. Over 150 people attended and enjoyed the evening, speeches and being treated.

22. Activities to engage are important to be visible and available for carers. Throughout the summer picnics were held for carers and staff to meet. Retention is as important as recruitment in ensuring that are carers remain within the service and feel supported after approval.
23. The service held consultation events so that carers could meet with managers to learn of service updates and for voice to be heard.
24. An area of development for the service will be working with colleagues in the Adoption Service to produce Practise Standards for children moving onto adoption and understand the crucial role that foster carers have in preparing babies for their forever homes.
25. With increased support from colleagues within the media and communications team the service will continue to drive recruitment campaigns, with a focus on finding households for siblings, teenagers, and children with additional needs.
26. The stability of placements remains strong, and the support offered to households is embedded within the service. Feedback is regularly sought from foster carer reviews.
27. Achieving Permanency at the earliest opportunity for children placed in Kinship Care, coming through for connected assessments, at the point of viability the service can process whether this needs to be a full Kinship Assessment or can progress straight through as a Special Guardian Assessment.
28. The service is pleased with placement stability and there has been evidence of the effective use of stability meetings to prevent placement disruption involving a team approach. approach involving the carers and their support too. The Approach involves all key individuals discussing how stability can be promoted.
29. The management team continues to expand. A new part time Team Manager joining the service to manage the Supported Lodgings Scheme.

### **Overview of targets and priorities for 2023/24**

30. The service has key targets and priorities for 2023/24:
  - Continue to use all forms of media in intensive recruitment campaigns to achieve stretch targets: 25 Mainstream Carers (net 16).
  - Two Specialist Carers
  - Five Supported Lodgings
  - It has been recognised that these targets are lower than in previous years recognising the current downward trend nationally in recruitment. The service has targets for enquiries, Stage one starts and approvals which are monitored monthly within performance meetings.
  - Focussed audits on voice – monitoring the quality of feedback from children, social workers, and IRO`s for carers in reviews, and using this in service design and development
  - Continuing to develop the trauma informed practice to both workers and carers
  - Strengthening the reflective practice in supervision of workers and carers
  - Registering a Supported Lodgings scheme with Ofsted to enable its practice from October 28th, 2023.

- Implement automated performance reporting post approval using Tableau reporting and dashboards. The service has 50% currently in operation.

### **Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure**

31. None

### **Equality Implications**

32. These are addressed throughout the report as the aim is to improve standards and outcomes for all children in foster care, including disabled children, young children and those from minority and harder to reach groups. The fostering Service has a diverse compliment of staff with representation across gender, age, sexual orientation as well as ethnicity.
33. The Fostering Service has an Equality and Diversity Action Plan in place which ensures that all staff are enabled to feel safe and supported, in addition to working towards a stronger, evidence-based approach to tackling inequalities - including relevant research, data, Quality Assurance activity and engagement with children, young people and families

### **Human Rights Implications**

34. There are no Human Rights Implications arising from this report.

### **Appendices**

Leicestershire Fostering Service Annual Report 2022/23

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