

Decision Maker: Care Services Portfolio Holder

For Pre-Decision Scrutiny by the Care Services PDS Committee on:

Date: 26th June 2014

Decision Type: Non-Urgent Executive Non-Key

Title: **FOSTERING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2013/14**

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Chief Officer: Executive Director of Education, Care & Health Services

Ward: (All Wards);

1. Reason for report

- 1.1 The Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011 requires the Fostering Agency to produce a report on fostering activity to the Agency Executive and an updated Statement of Purpose on an annual basis.
- 1.2 This report presents to the Care Services Policy Development and Scrutiny Committee details of activity from 1 April 2013 to 31.March 2014, together with the updated Statement of Purpose (Appendix 1).
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2. **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

The Care Services Policy, Development and Scrutiny Committee is asked to:

- (i) Consider and comment upon the report and revised Statement of Purpose.**
- (ii) Recommend that the report and revised Statement of Purpose be agreed by the Care Services Portfolio Holder.**

Corporate Policy

1. Policy Status: Existing Policy:
 2. BBB Priority: Children and Young People:
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Financial

1. Cost of proposal: No Cost:
 2. Ongoing costs: Not Applicable:
 3. Budget head/performance centre: 833120
 4. Total current budget for this head: £4,623,910
 5. Source of funding: Base budget
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Staff

1. Number of staff (current and additional): 22
 2. If from existing staff resources, number of staff hours:
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Legal

1. Legal Requirement: Statutory Requirement:
 2. Call-in: Applicable:
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Customer Impact

1. Estimated number of users/beneficiaries (current and projected): N/A
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Ward Councillor Views

1. Have Ward Councillors been asked for comments? Not Applicable
2. Summary of Ward Councillors comments:

3. COMMENTARY

3.1 The Fostering Services Regulations 2011 and National Minimum Standards 2011 require all fostering services to provide, and annually review, a written Statement of Purpose setting out the aims and objectives of the service and facilities provided.

3.2 In addition, Standard 25.7 of the National Minimum Standards 2011, requires the Fostering Agency to produce a report on fostering activity to the Agency Executive, to:

- Receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency;
- Monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children;
- Satisfy itself that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.

3.3 The Bromley Fostering Service Statement of Purpose reflects the Council's corporate priorities and strives to ensure that there are sufficient foster carers to meet the needs of our children and young people.

3.4 Performance:

3.5 The Fostering Service provides a service for looked after children. The service is committed to identifying and supporting stable placements for children and young people where foster care is the identified plan.

3.6 2013/14 has been a busy year for the fostering service, which has included the requirement to implement significant challenging changes to legislation and practice, reviews and revisions to policies and procedures as well as changes to enhance the quality of support and training available to foster carers.

3.7 As of the 31st March 2014 Bromley had 277 looked after children of which 68.5% were placed with in house foster carers; a decrease of 1.9% from the 31 March 2013. As of 31 March 2014, 8.7% were placed with connected persons foster carers; a decrease of 6% from 31 March 2013.

3.8 The service provides a range of placements including emergency placements, short term and bridging placements, long term care and short breaks. As of the 31st March 2014 Bromley had 121 foster carer units; a decrease from 133 on 31 March 2013.

3.9 Since 1 April 2013, 11 new fostering units have been approved and 23 fostering units have had their approval as foster carers terminated. Termination of approval occurs for a variety of reasons and the total number during the review period is not unusually higher than in previous years. Since 1st April 2013, 9 connected person foster carers have had their approval terminated. Connected person foster carers are carers who are related or friends already known to the child who came forward to be assessed as their foster carer. They are approved only for a named child or young person related or known to them. In seven of these cases, the young persons' being cared for had attained the age of 18. Only one connected person foster carer has had their approval terminated because of placement breakdown. In this instance an

alternative family and friends carer was approved to take over the care of the young person. In the case of the second young person the connected person carer became unwell and was no longer able to care for the young person in question. In this case also an alternative connected person carer was approved to take over the care of the young person in question. No other connected person carers had their approval terminated for either a safeguarding or quality of care reason.

- 3.10 In July 2013, the fostering team assumed responsibility for undertaking assessments of connected persons. This change was made as part of the Court Pilot Project to reduce the timescales for court proceedings to twenty six weeks from Issuing to Final Hearing. The Connected Person Project undertook assessments of connected person foster carers as well as those applying for Special Guardianship Orders in relation to specific children.
- 3.11 During the period under review thirty one assessments were completed within very short timescales. Assessments included those of connected persons foster carers and special guardians. A total of seventeen children were placed on the basis of temporary approval under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 and assessments were completed in relation to thirteen other children as part of special guardianship order applications. A total of twenty nine children achieved permanence through Special Guardianship. In the context of permanence, thirteen children were matched at the Fostering Panel and a further 17 children were also adopted.
- 3.12 In January 2014, a Deputy Group Manager was recruited to the project and three social work staff were recruited between March and April 2014. This team is now part of a discrete service within the Fostering Team. These changes enabled assessments to be concluded within very short timescales and have contributed towards Bromley's good performance in ensuring that care proceedings are concluded within the new statutory 26 week timeframe.
- 3.13 As of 31 March 2014 there were 16 "Form F" foster carer assessments allocated within the Fostering team at varying stages of completion. There were five potential fostering units waiting to proceed to a 'Skills to Foster' course.
- 3.14 The Fostering Team received 78 registrations of interest about fostering for Bromley during 2013/14. At the Screening Call stage, 23 applicants failed to proceed to full assessment as a result of either not meeting the minimum requirements (such as bedroom availability or age criteria) or applicants deciding not to proceed after discussion.
- 3.15 Following initial visits a further 19 prospective applicants failed to proceed for a variety of reasons including self rejection following discussions with the Supervising Social Worker. It should be noted that following the comprehensive Initial Visit a number of applicants strongly expressed the view that they were unwilling to proceed due to the intrusive nature of the assessment process.
- 3.16 During the period under review, 31 prospective foster families were recommended for progression to the 'Skills to Foster' Course of which 17 were recommended to progress to Stage Two of the assessment process, 3 did not demonstrate the required skills and 8 withdrew or failed to attend. The remaining 3 families are booked to attend the next "Skills to Foster" course schedule for May 2014.

3.17 Regulation 17 and National Minimum Standard 21.10 states that on approval foster carers are given information either in a Handbook or by an electronic resource which covers: policies, procedures, guidance, financial information, legal information and insurance details. In 2013/14 the Fostering Service undertook a comprehensive review of its Foster Carer's Handbook. The review was co-ordinated by an Independent Consultant in conjunction with the Fostering Team and involved consultation with all stakeholders and a focus group of foster carers. The new Foster Carer Handbook reflects current government legislation and guidance, as well as London Borough of Bromley procedures, and is now available electronically for all London Borough of Bromley foster carers and staff. The official launch of the Handbook was in April 2014.

3.18 Recruitment Activity:

3.19 During 2013/14 the service contributed to work being undertaken on our foster carer sufficiency requirements and also reviewed our recruitment strategy to ensure our advertising for carers was targeted to our assessed future needs. This has led to a very clear programme of recruitment being developed with the News Shopper group of publications commencing April 2014/15.

3.20 Work has also continued to increase the range of information available to potential carers through the council's website, actively re-enforcing fostering for Bromley as the destination of choice for local families considering a career in fostering.

3.21 The service has continued to actively advertise for foster carers. A fostering feature was published in the News Shopper and work is currently underway to host an information event to promote looked after children and fostering following publication of this article. We continue to work with the communications team to market fostering in Bromley

3.22 A part time member of staff was recruited in December 2013 to focus specifically on the responses to, and management and progression of, applications from interested potential foster carers. This appointment has supported the process of application and improvements in and response times.

3.23 The Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 introduced a number of significant changes with respect to the assessment and approval of foster carers. In September 2013 the Fostering Team implemented a new two stage recruitment process with clearly defined timescales for responding to expression of interest from prospective applicants. The Fostering Team has set an objective to complete the approval of prospective foster carers within six months of Initial application. Following the appointment of the part-time Recruitment Co-Ordinator the progress of applications have been effectively monitored. All systems and processes within the team have been streamlined to speed up the recruitment process with the aim of meeting regulatory requirements whilst ensuring sufficiency of placements to looked after children and young people.

3.24 The fostering service has piloted involving young people in the assessment of prospective foster carers. This has included undertaking a small presentation at the skills to foster course. Members of the Living in Care Council (LinCC) led on the development of information packs to be given to Looked After Children (LAC) and the development of a web site for looked after children which went live in October 2013.

3.25 Training and Support

- 3.26 During 2013/14 work was undertaken to completely review and update the foster carer handbook. This included the updating of various policies and the inclusion of revised statutory requirement. The handbook, which now completely web based, was launched at our annual foster carer conference in April.
- 3.27 2013./14 also saw a review of our training programme resulting in training procurement and course organisation being transferred to the corporate training team. In addition, foster carers have been included in the new learning hub arrangements which allows the training team to communicate with them electronically.
- 3.28 Our support groups for foster carers continue to be well attended and we are looking at developing these groups further using our experienced foster carers as a resource. A refreshed Bromley Foster Carer Association (BFCA) has continued to work with officers to ensure that we work in collaboration with carers to continue to improve the service.

3.29 Allowances

- 3.30 The Fostering Allowance Scheme introduced in August 2012, has now been effectively implemented.
- 3.31 Our new simplified scheme remains extremely competitive to neighbouring authorities and in some cases match allowances paid by Independent Fostering Agency providers. It is encouraging to note that the new allowance scheme has not had a significant and ongoing negative impact on the recruitment or retention of foster carers.
- 3.32 Changes to legislation in July 2013 now requires the local authority to ensure that its allowance policy does not differentiate between foster carers who have a connection to the child being cared for and those who do not. This has necessitated a review of our allowance scheme to ensure that the criteria for payment of a professional fee to carers is clear and compliant with legislation.

3.33 Fostering Panel and Agency Decision Maker.

- 3.34 The Fostering Panel met nineteen times between 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2014. Attendance at panel has consistently averaged seven members at each panel over this period. This demonstrates a continuing high level of commitment from our panel members. However it has been recognised that extending the panel's central list would widen expertise and help prevent the risk of a panel failing to be quorate. It should be noted, however, that the increase in the number of panel meeting did not result in any marked decrease in attendance and this is evidence of the commitment of panel members to supporting Bromley's Fostering Service to delivery positives outcomes for looked after children and young people for whom it has a responsibility.
- 3.35 Standard 14(2) of the National Minimum Standards for Fostering states that Panels must provide a quality assurance feedback to the Fostering Service provider on the quality of reports being presented to panel. In March 2013 a feedback form for panel members was introduced and is in the process of being monitored in respect of how useful providing feedback in this format is, and its effectiveness towards improving standards within the reports

that are presented to panel. Members noted a marked improvement in the quality of reports being presented to panel. This was especially so with regard to the matching of children and young people with permanent foster carers. The wishes and feeling of children and young people was evident in their feedback and this was positively commented upon by panel members who found this helpful in terms of providing a context for making a clear recommendation to the agency decision maker.

- 3.36 The fostering panel is responsible for making recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker as to the suitability of applicants to become foster carers and any conditions that should be attached to their approval.
- 3.37 In addition, the fostering panel also makes recommendations in relation to the long term matching of children to their foster carers and formally reviews all foster carers after their first year following approval and every three years subsequently.
- 3.38 The Agency Decision Maker is Kay Weiss, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care. In compliance with the National Minimum Standards the fostering panel recommendations have been considered and ratified within the prescribed timescale

3.39 Fostering Service Management

- 3.40 Our new Group Manager of the combined Fostering and Adoption service has been in post since 11 February 2013.
- 3.41 We have been successful in appointing a new Deputy Group Manager who will be responsible for the assessment function of the adoption element of the new service and a new Deputy Group Manager for post adoption support has been appointed on a temporary basis. Together with the appointment of a Deputy Group Manager in the Fostering Service and an additional locum Deputy Group Manager in the Fostering service, and the Deputy Group Manager for the connected person service, this will provide a robust and cohesive leadership team to drive forward improvements.

3.42 Future Developments

- 3.43 An audit of training needs and the development of a comprehensive training programme has been completed and implemented. This has had a positive impact and foster carer attendance at relevant training courses is markedly improved. Responsibility for coordinating training for carers is being undertaken by the Learning and Development Team working in close partnership with the fostering service and the Deputy Group Manager Fostering. We have actively promoted the necessary courses and support for foster carers to complete the requirements of the Training, Standards and Development (TSD) programme which foster carers are required to complete within their first twelve months from approval.
- 3.44 We are in the process of developing an interactive website for our foster carers that will enhance communication as well as contain links to the Foster Carer Handbook, policies and procedures, and contact details for support organisations. The website will also provide links to our recruitment pages and application process further increasing our exposure to potential foster carers.

3.45 In addition, we will continue to explore ways to continually attract new carers to Bromley, both to replace carers that have decided to retire from fostering and to meet the needs of children and young people requiring placements.

4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The production of an annual report and updated statement of purpose is a statutory requirement in The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.

Non-Applicable Sections:	Policy implications Financial implications Personnel implications
Background Documents: (Access via Contact Officer)	