



<u>Committee and Date</u>
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<u>Item</u>
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Fostering Service Annual Report 1st April 2020 to the 31st March 2021

**Responsible
Officer**

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1. Synopsis

This report provides an overview of the activity, data and performance of Shropshire Council's Fostering Services from the 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. This report is for information and no decisions are required. The full annual report is attached at Appendix 1.

2. Executive Summary

Fostering services are a regulated activity provided by either a Local Authority or an Independent Fostering Agency. The service is regulated under The Children Act 1989 & 2004; Care Standards Act 2000 and the Fostering Service Regulations 2011.

In line with the increase in children looked after by Shropshire Council, there has been a significant increase in work for the fostering service, especially from a connected carer perspective.

Despite the increase in work, the service has succeeded in recruiting more mainstream foster carers to provide care for children looked after in comparison to last year. However, there were 13 resignations from mainstream households, resulting in no net gain in placement capacity.

Covid 19 has impacted on the delivery of fostering services. The flexibilities contained in 'The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) Amendment Regulations 2020' have been fully utilised to ensure the continuation of statutory services.

Placement stability and permanency for children looked after continues to be a key focus of activity. During this episode, there have been 12 Special Guardianship orders granted for children looked after and a further 9 children permanently matched with their foster carers. Wrap

around support is used to support vulnerable placements to prevent a further disruption for children.

3. Recommendations

3.1 Cabinet is requested to consider the information in this report and confirm its support for the work of Shropshire's Fostering Services as set out in the Annual Report in fulfilling the Council's statutory and regulatory requirements.

REPORT

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

4.1 Risk Management

Children and young people who are looked after by the local authority should wherever possible be cared for in a family-based setting. In the event of this not being possible within a connected carer arrangement with people already known to the child, it should be with mainstream foster carers. It is imperative there is sufficient focus on the growth of fostering as a resource to provide suitable and safe placements for children looked after. The risk is, if there is not sufficient focus on the growth of fostering services, we will be unable to provide sufficient mainstream foster placements.

Whilst a high proportion of children looked after are being cared for in Shropshire placements, there is a growing number of children and young people placed in Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements. The risk is, if there is not sufficient focus on the growth of fostering services, we will continue to see high numbers of children placed in IFA placements.

There are potentially risks arising from children and young people feeling alienated or isolated when they are placed at a distance from their birth family, education placement, social and leisure activities, we need to do all we can to place child and young people in local placements.

4.2 Human Rights

Children and young people have a right to be safe and to feel safe. If this can't be achieved withing their birth family, as a local authority and statutory body, we need to provide high quality foster placements so children can be safely cared for and safeguarded from further harm

Foster carers have the right to receive a good service from their fostering provider, this includes the provision of timely assessments, robust support and training, access to independent support and advocacy and

where appropriate help and assistance for them to secure permanence for the children they are caring for.

4.3 Equalities

All children and young people requiring a foster placement need foster carers who can support their access to health services, educational placements and support their ongoing relationships with birth family members and peers.

Connected carers are entitled to the same level of service provision as mainstream foster carers, their support needs are often different, however there needs to be flexibility in the system to be able to respond to the different needs of all carers.

Shropshire is a provider of regulated fostering services, there is the requirement to legally respond to Shropshire residents to secure permanence orders for children not looked after by Shropshire council and to monitor and oversee private fostering arrangements for all children under 16 living in Shropshire and under 18 should a child have a disability.

4.4 Community

Children and young people should have the opportunity to remain in their local community, recruitment to fostering will always be targeted to those living in Shropshire and in the immediate surrounding areas.

Shropshire Foster Carer Association has responsibility for the peer support of foster carers, they organise local events targeted at the community of foster carers.

Mockingbird (detailed in the report) will be a key focus of activity for the coming year, the purpose of Mockingbird is focused on a community response to fostering.

4.5 Consultation

The Fostering Service consulted widely with carers on the introduction of the new fee and allowance policy introduced in March 2020.

Young people are always consulted in making their care plans and whilst the children in care group (CiC) has been seriously disrupted through Covid, low level activity and consultation has continued.

5. Financial Implications

There are no new financial considerations contained in the report. The placement budget which includes spend on fostering placements is closely

monitored by our finance business partner and also through our internal placement monitoring panels.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

Not applicable

7. Background

7.1 Remit of the fostering service

The Fostering Service is a regulated activity, the remit is for the recruitment, assessment and support of mainstream and connected person fostering households. All foster carers require the approval of the Agency Decision Maker following a recommendation from fostering panel on their suitability to foster.

Regulated activity comprises of key components; annual foster carer review or sooner where there are concerns, supervision and support visits, frequency determined by the individual needs of the carer, unannounced visits, regular renewal of DBS and medical checks, completion of personal development plans and monitoring of up-to-date training.

In addition to foster carers who directly care for children looked after, as a statutory service, there is also a duty to work with private fostering and members of the public seeking a special guardianship order for a child in their care.

7.2 Service Growth

There has, in line with the growth in numbers of children looked after been significant growth in activity for the fostering service, this is particularly evident in the growth of the number of connected carer viability assessments and approvals. Connected carers are usually grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings of close friends where often there is a level of disfunction in the family dynamic which has necessitated the involvement of children's services. These placements require high levels of support, supervision and oversight. The judiciary will always be involved in connected carer placements, as a result, this work takes priority over the approval and support of mainstream fostering.

To ensure we also continue to grow our mainstream foster carer resource, the service is always striving to recruit more carers by using innovative marketing campaigns and by ensuring we are competitive with independent fostering agency agencies with competitive pay rates, robust training packages and regular support and supervision.

7.3 National Context

Nationally, there has been growth in the numbers of children looked after, initial projections were that most Local Authorities would see an increase of around 10% in numbers. In direct contrast, there is a national shortage of foster carers, most local authorities are seeing a decrease in fostering enquiry rates, hence the need to be a competitor in the fostering recruitment market.

7.4 Future Service Developments

The service is continuing to address the challenges of Covid 19. The most significant changes have been the move to virtual fostering panels and in the early stages of the pandemic virtual working practices. Whilst the service has now moved back to face-to-face work, virtual fostering panels have proved successful and whilst some move may be made to the format of these in the future, the service is likely to continue to use them.

Mockingbird is an area for future development, this work is being undertaken as part of our regional Together 4 Children permanency partnership.

It is likely the growth in the number of children looked after will continue to present challenges in ensuring we are able to continue to recruit new carers for Shropshire children, this alongside the need to manage the growth in connected carers will be a key focus of activity.

8. Additional Information

There is no additional information to be considered.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1. No decision is required from Cabinet, but it is requested that the information is noted

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

N/A

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Cllr Kirstie Hurst-Knight

Local Member

All members

Appendices

[Please list the titles of Appendices and provide a link to the Sharepoint site where the document is located]

1. Fostering Service Annual Report 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021