

18 December 2014		ITEM: 8
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Thurrock Fostering Service		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key	
Report of: Roland Minto – Service Manager, Placements and Support		
Accountable Head of Service: Andrew Carter, Head of Children’s Services		
Accountable Director: Carmel Littleton, Director of Children’s Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

This report is intended to provide members of Thurrock Corporate Parenting Committee with relevant information regarding the performance and development of the Thurrock Fostering Service.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 The members of the Corporate Parenting Committee are asked to consider this report, noting both the current work of the service and the challenges that lay ahead, and support Officers in their efforts to further develop the service.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1** The number of Looked After Children Thurrock has increased greatly since March 2011. At that point the year end figure was 210, a reduction from the previous year. However since then, we have experienced a steady rise, and over recent months the number has hovered around 300. There are a variety of factors contributing to this, and many authorities have experienced increases, though not necessarily on the same level. However the critical consequence has been the need for Thurrock to identify and support significantly more children’s placements, and the Fostering Service is inevitably at the heart of this.
- 2.2** In previous years Thurrock managed always to maintain a high level of children placed in foster care (either in-house or Independent Sector), and recorded 82% in this category for 2011-2012. We are still managing to place

over 72% of children in Foster care, at a time when we have a significant number of older adolescents for whom foster care may not be an appropriate option initially.

- 2.3 However, in line with the experience of many other local authorities, there has been a significant shift in the balance of in-house/Independent Fostering Agency placements. This is in part directly related to the highly competitive market for attracting new carers, and the investment the independent sector has made in aggressive marketing strategies. This is a key challenge to which we plan to rise, focusing on consistent marketing presence in the different local Thurrock communities rather than large scale media advertising; this is discussed below.
- 2.4 Thurrock's Fostering Service continues to offer good quality provision to many of our young people, and the report below sets out some key features and information about the service over the last year.

3. Structure and Staffing

- 3.1 The Fostering service is located within Care and Targeted Outcomes, within Children's Services. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes is Andrew Carter, who is the nominated decision maker for the Fostering Service. The Fostering Service is operationally managed by Roland Minto, Service Manager, Placements and Support.
- 3.2 The Fostering Service has been made up of 4 teams:
- Foster Carer Support Team
 - Therapeutic Foster Care Team
 - Preparation for Independence Team
 - Recruitment and Assessment Team

The Preparation for Independence Team is a small group of Foster Carers, with a specific role of looking after older adolescents who may be leaving the care system soon, and whose specific need is for a placement which can provide them with an opportunity to develop the self-reliance they already possess in a supported environment. The team was previously known as the Supported Lodgings Team, but was recently re-named as the previous title was both somewhat old-fashioned and did not accurately reflect their status as approved Foster Carers.

Additionally Thurrock also recruits and retains a group of Shared Carers, who were previously managed operationally from within the Team for Disabled Children. However because of the development of other mechanisms to support families with disabled children this has declined in size, and hence the decision was made early in 2014 to incorporate these Foster Carers into the remit of the Foster Carer Support Team.

A structure chart is attached as an Appendix.

- 3.3 In addition to managing a large group of our in-house Carers, the Foster Care Support Team have also been responsible for staffing our Placements Duty system, thus responding to new placement requests either for new entrants to care or planned placement moves. This has undoubtedly taken some focus and attention away from their core task, but this will come to an end in the New Year as we have successfully recruited to a new Placement Officer post, created with money released through the deletion of a post elsewhere in CATO.
- 3.4 The staffing of the Service has been extremely stable over recent years, with very few permanent departures or new appointments. This in part is reflected in the high number of workers who have attained the status of Senior Practitioner. However availability of staff has been significantly lessened by successive periods of maternity leave, affecting all the teams simultaneously. Where possible we have used available resources to fund some internal secondment into the service, but inevitably there has been some spreading of workloads across the rest of the team. In addition the Family Support Worker in the Foster Carer Support Team has been undertaking her qualifying training, and has been absent on placement.
- 3.4 More significantly the late summer saw the resignation of the Team Manager of the Foster Carer Support Team for a combination of health and personal reasons. A decision on whether to seek direct replacement or look at structural change has yet to be made. This is discussed further below.

4. Foster Carers

- 4.1 At 1.11.2014 Thurrock had 104 Fostering Households, either formally approved following presentation at the Fostering Panel, or through Temporary Approval of a "Connected Person" (usually a family member of the child) pending full assessment.
- 4.2 Foster Carers can be subdivided as follows, depending on which type of provision they can offer, and where they are located within the service:

Connected Persons (often referred to as Family and Friends Carers):	10
Temporarily Approved Connected Persons	7
General Carers:	37
Advanced Carers:	21
Shared Carers (providing respite for children with disabilities):	5
Preparation for Independence:	8
Therapeutic Foster Carers	16

General, Advanced, Shared Care and Connected Persons Foster Carers are currently managed and supported by the Foster Carer Support Team, whilst Therapeutic and Preparation for Independence Carers are managed through the Therapeutic/Preparation for Independence Team.

- 4.3 Previously Foster Cares managed by the Foster Carers Support Team were divided into Levels 1, 2 and 3, depending on experience, availability and types of placement taken. However a revision of our previous payment structure was undertaken in 2013, in order to improve our competitiveness with other Agencies to attract new applicants, particularly those considering fostering for the first time, and also to acknowledge the fact that at times the distinction between Levels 1 and 2 had lost some validity. These carers now constitute the General and Advanced Groups.
- 4.4 The current maximum capacity of children that could be placed within the service is approximately 170. The reason for “approximately” is that some carers are approved, for example, to take one child “or two if siblings”. This is generally in response to bedroom availability and hence capacity does vary according to which children or young people are being referred.
- 4.5 In addition there will always be a shortfall between notional capacity and current availability, as Foster Carers may be unavailable for periods of time because of illness or other personal circumstances, because of requests to have a planned break, or because although approved for more than one child the needs of a particular child in placement are such that it is inappropriate to place a further child.
- 4.6 At 27.11.2014 one hundred and eleven children were placed with in-house foster carers, and during the financial year 2013-2014 in total 193 children were placed within the service at some point.

5. Panel and assessments

- 5.1 Towards the end of 2013-2014 we were sorry to lose our Independent Panel Chair, Alan Johnstone, due to pressure of other commitments. This was a considerable loss as Alan had been a very conscientious and committed individual, who had made an enormous contribution to Thurrock.. However we were fortunate to be able to recruit Peter Turner into the role. Peter came with considerable previous knowledge and experience, and therefore the business of Panel was able to continue without major disruption.
- 5.2 Assessments of new Foster Carers to be considered by Panel are generally completed by the Recruitment and Assessment Team. Historically there have been occasional assessments completed elsewhere in the service, notably of applicants to become Shared Care Foster Carers, who were assessed within the Team for Disabled Children, but with the transfer of this cohort of carers, as described above, this will no longer be the case and we believe this will add greater consistency and oversight.
- 5.3 During 2013-2014 fifteen new fostering households were presented to Panel for approval, and all were subsequently signed off by the Agency Decision Maker. Four of these assessments were of Connected Persons Carers, i.e. for

specific children already placed with them. Such assessments generally have to be prioritised over other assessments, as having the child already “in situ” means the assessment must be commenced at short notice to ensure the on-going legality of the placement. In other instances the child may not be already placed, but as an authority we are being directed to complete such assessments by the Court, and many of them do not reach completion and presentation at Panel for various reasons, such as the making of Special Guardianship Orders in Care Proceedings (or indeed the child being able to return home) make the Fostering assessment redundant.

- 5.4 So far this year the team has had to begin twenty-six of these assessments. Although the numbers of assessments reaching Panel thus do not fully reflect the work undertaken by the team, it is important to appreciate that these are positive permanency outcomes to which the Fostering Team will have made a major contribution.
- 5.5 Assessment capacity was significantly reduced for much of the last year through absence caused by maternity leave. So far in 2014-2015 there have been nine new households approved, and with the return of the member of staff in October in the period ahead we anticipate a further 9 assessments will be presented to Panel by March 2015.
- 5.6 In 2013-2014 there were 13 resignations, which was a higher proportion than would be expected from previous years. However this was in part a product of deliberately seeking to persuade some carers who had effectively been dormant for some time to resign, as retaining them as approved carers was distorting the apparent capacity.
- 4 of the carers had not had a child placed with them from between 6 and 18 months prior to resignation
 - 1 Couple had a bereavement shortly after approval, and decided that fostering was no longer something they wished to pursue, having never actually had a placement
 - 1 carer resigned because of the ill-health of a family member
 - 1 couple resigned through retirement aged 67
 - 1 couple resigned as they adopted the children they were looking after
 - 1 Connected person resigned as the child returned home
 - 1 Connected person placement broke down
 - 1 Connected person resigned as the young person turned 18, so registration was no longer relevant
 - 2 other households resigned because of other changes of personal circumstances
- 5.7 In 2013-2014 two carers were taken back to Panel for de-registration, as we had serious concerns about their future capacity to provide the standard of care we require. Including approvals, resignations, de-registrations, first annual household reviews after registration, and changes of approval Panel considered 38 different items in 2013-2014.

6 Budgets

- 6.1 The combined revised budget across the teams for 2013-2014 was £3,841,453, with an end year outturn of £3,329,877. Approximately £837,000 of the expenditure was spent on staffing costs (spread across 18 individuals) with the remainder largely allocated to payments to Foster Carers. The budget for 2014-2015 is broadly following the same course.
- 6.2 As such we were therefore able to come in under budget. However this was at the expense of an overspend against placements in the independent sector, and it remains our longer term priority to reduce the external costs by recruiting more local in-house foster carers. The additional funding previously provided has ensured there has been no loss of carers to other Agencies, but attracting and recruiting more of our own applicants has been slower than hoped.

7. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 7.1 There are a number of challenges currently facing the service which need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The first of these is a decision about the currently vacant Team Manager post for the Foster Carer Support Team. Given the authority's financial prognosis, and the need to make savings, serious consideration is being given to consolidating the work of the team between the existing Team Manager posts, thus creating a valuable savings option. However we are keen to avoid creating a team too large to manage satisfactorily, which could correspondingly weaken the support and oversight available to foster carers, and thus are likely to trial this arrangement for a period to evaluate whether it could be implemented safely longer term, and whether any other consequential supervisory arrangements would be required.
- 7.2 A further challenge to be addressed is the implementation of an effective "Staying Put" Policy. Members of the Committee may be aware of this initiative from earlier discussions, following legislative change earlier in the year empowering and encouraging Fostering Agencies to keep young people in Foster placements after their eighteenth birthdays. In principle we welcome this development, but there are a number of practical aspects which all local authorities are grappling with, most notably devising sustainable financial policies to support these arrangements.
- 7.3 Some additional finance has been provided by central government, but this by no means covers the costs involved and most local authorities' policies focus on the young person claiming all the state benefits to which they are entitled, including Housing Benefit, which would be payable to the foster carer. Local authorities will then attempt to make good the difference to what the carer was previously receiving in Fostering Allowance. This inevitably changes the relationship between carer and young person, effectively making the relationship one of landlord/tenant. This is not a change all carers will

welcome, and although we have begun to introduce this approach in some cases, we will be monitoring closely the impact for both young people and carers.

- 7.4 There is a pressing need to review and update some of the Policy documents relating to the service, which are now well beyond their planned review dates. In many instances the changes required will be relatively small. However this will need to be an urgent task for the early part of 2015.
- 7.5 Most importantly will be the need to raise the profile of our recruitment activity in early 2015, which will require the active support of the Corporate Communications Team. Our objective is to create a steady but manageable flow of applicants rather than a sudden influx, and we are clear that the most effective way to achieve this is to maintain a steady local media and marketing presence, supported by frequent local events (using both those focused specifically on fostering and more widely community-based such as the Orsett Show). Working closely with the Communications Team we will therefore be setting a target of between 15-20 new approvals (not including Connected Person approvals) for 2015-2016.
- 7.6 However one long standing objective, of widening the potential pool of applicant's in terms of diversity, took a significant step forward, when members of the service recently attended a meeting of the local Thurrock Multi Faith Forum. We will be seeking to engage the positive interest shown in further dialogue, and there were indications that representatives of all the local faiths could be valuable partners in getting our message out more widely in the community.

8. Reasons for Recommendation

- 8.1 Despite the acknowledged challenges the service continues to provide good provision to many of our most needy young people, and at a time of increasing uncertainty the clear support of the Committee for the work undertaken would be a significant encouragement in taking forward the developmental agenda.

9. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 9.1 The work of the team is central to the provision offered to Thurrock's Looked After Children, and operates to deliver one of the key objectives of the Children and Young Peoples Plan, "Objective CYPP (PWN) 3.3. Deliver outstanding fostering, private fostering & adoption; develop & maintain excellent services for children in care".

10.1 Implications

10.1 Financial

Placements for Looked After Children consume a considerable amount of the Council's financial resources. It is therefore vital that the service maximises the potential for cost effective local placements. Investment in appropriate and successful advertising and recruitment activity would produce significant savings longer term.

Implications verified by: **Kay Goodacre**
Children's Services Finance Manager

10.2 Legal

The key legal implication of this report is that the service must ensure that Panel continues to be legally constituted and that decisions made there are in line with the legislation and associated regulations. Similarly attention must be paid at all times to the process of making any Temporary Approvals, to avoid any possibility of having a child in an illegal placement which could leave the authority vulnerable to challenge.

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
Solicitor

10.3 Diversity and Equality

The local authority has a clear duty to ensure that placements are identified appropriate to the needs of all children who require them. This is true for children of all backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities, but also for children with significant disabilities and particularly those less able to communicate their wishes and feelings to those organising their care. However the recent dialogue with the Multi Faith forum is a positive step.

Implications verified by: **Teresa Evans**
Equalities and Cohesion Officer

10.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

11. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

Appendix 1 Structure of Service

Report Author:

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Service Manager, Placement Support

Children's Services, Care and Targeted Outcomes