

24 NOVEMBER 2015

**Progress against recommendations identified by the Adoption and Fostering
Working Group Report**

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Councillor E Hughes – Care and Safeguarding

Executive Summary:

The report provides an update of progress against recommendations arising from the Adoption and Fostering Working Group report.

Reason for scrutiny:

In January 2015 the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel established an Adoption and Fostering Working Group to undertake a focused piece of work to understand and scrutinise how Walsall operated its Adoption and Fostering Service. In October 2015 the final report was published. The report identified 18 recommendations to help improve Adoption and Fostering Services for foster carers, adopters and most importantly for the children and young people placed in their care. The enclosed report details progress against all of the recommendations and provides commentary on overall service development and improvement.

Recommendation

That the Panel notes the contents of this report and provides feedback, particularly where there are decisions to be made. That further reports be submitted to the Panel as and when there are significant developments relating to the recommendations of the Working Group.

Background papers:

The final Adoption and Fostering Working Group Report (October 2015)

Resources and legal considerations:

None directly arising from this report.

Citizen impact:

The outcomes and improvements arising from the recommendations will improve services for Walsall Foster Carers and Adopters and most importantly for the children and young people who become Looked After and for whom the Council becomes the Corporate Parent.

Environmental impact:

None arising directly from this report

Performance management:

There are no performance management issues arising directly as a result of this report.

Equality Implications:

Children and young people placed in adoption or fostering placements are vulnerable by virtue of the fact they are unable to remain with their birth parents. The Local Authority has had to intervene to safeguard their welfare and to place them in the care of the Local Authority. The recommendations seek to improve adoption and fostering services for the benefit of adopters, foster carers and a particularly vulnerable group of children and young people.

Consultation:

None

Contact Officer:

Lisa Preston

Group Manager-Strategic Lead for Provider Services

01922 655547

Lisa.preston@walsall.gov.uk

Progress report against recommendations identified by the Adoption and Fostering Working Group

Introduction

In January 2015, members of the Children's Scrutiny Panel undertook a focused piece of work to understand and scrutinise the provision of adoption and fostering services in Walsall and how these impacted on the lives of adopters, foster carers and – most importantly – children and young people. The working group consisted of four members who were able to meet with key officers responsible for service delivery. Members also had the opportunity to meet with foster carers and adopters to ascertain how they felt the service operated and whether they could identify any areas for improvement.

In October 2015, the final working group report was published. The report contained 18 recommendations that members felt should be considered in order to deliver service improvement. Some of these recommendations required an update to be presented to Education and Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel in November 2015.

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on all recommendations and also to provide a wider update on service development for both adoption and fostering.

Recommendations

- 1. That Members' of the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel revisit the Fostering and Adoption Service within 12 months to review the impact of the changes to the service following the service redesign, implementation of budget savings and introduction of MOSAIC;***

Arrangements will be made in the New Year for members to re-visit the service to talk about the impact of the service re-design, budget proposals and Mosaic. Some of this will be referenced in this report and will allow members to see some of the early impact.

- 2. That the Panel consider nominating two members from its membership to become looked after children champions;***

Specific, Looked after Children Champions are yet to be identified. However, Councillor Tina Jukes has been identified as the member to attend adoption panel and Councillor Kath Philips has been identified as the member to attend fostering panel. Both are currently going through the recruitment process to become adoption and fostering central list of Panel members. The chair of the Panel may wish to consider whether it is appropriate to appoint Councillors Jukes and Philips as the champions for Looked after Children. Their appointment as panel members will enable them to gain an understanding of a child's journey through the care system and have an over-sight where improvements can be from a child and young person's perspective.

- 3. That information on Fostering for Adoption is included on the 'Fostering in Walsall' Website;***

This recommendation has been carefully considered by the service. Officers have also undertaken some simple bench marking with partner Local Authorities. It is important to recognise that there is a link between fostering and adoption in a 'Foster to Adopt'

situation. Fostering for adoption is an avenue open to those progressing through an adoption application or to approved adoptive families; it is not an option open to foster carers. Information regarding fostering for adoption is included on Walsall's adoption website where adopters can access information about the benefits for themselves and for our looked after children. Partners share my concern that including information about foster to adopt on our fostering website could give mixed messages to foster carers allowing them to think foster to adopt is an option for them. It is important that those seeking information about fostering are also given information about adoption as experience tells us some foster carers apply to foster thinking we would not consider them to adopt. To address this we need to continue with our current practice of making information about adoption available at information evenings. We also need to ensure that, during initial assessments of foster carers, there is a clear and frank discussion with them about their motivation to foster. If it becomes apparent that applicants would ideally like to adopt, then they should be re-directed to Adoption in the Black Country.

4. That a review of 'Staying Put' arrangements be undertaken to assess its potential impact on the availability of Fostering placements in Walsall;

The arrangements for 'Staying Put' are kept under regular review. From those agreed so far, it is evident that even without the provision of Staying Put, those young people would have remained in placement as the carers are committed to the young people and view them as part of their family now and in the longer term. There may be a wider impact in the coming years if and when more young people stay put. Currently, there are between 10-15 active Staying Put cases. There are a number of others soon to be considered as young people approach their 18th birthday. The key to addressing this is to ensure that foster care recruitment continues to be a high priority so that more carers continue to be available for Walsall children and young people who can offer care to those children and young people both in the short and the long term.

5. That a report be submitted to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel to provide assurance that every effort is made to identify, through both the council and its partners processes, those children and young people that are in private fostering arrangements;

Walsall Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB) undertook a piece of work between March 2015 and June 2015 to assure itself that the wider partnership workforce teachers, primary health and other staff working with children are aware of their responsibilities to make a referral to the Local Authority's children's social care and the Police if:

- they become aware of a private fostering arrangement which is not likely to be notified to the Local Authority
- they have doubts about whether a child's carers are actually their parents, and there is evidence to support these doubts

in accordance with statutory requirements. The WSCB were assured that partners have in place arrangements to ensure that their staff are aware of their responsibilities and that this awareness raising is revisited on a regular basis. Board Members were unable to identify any specific barriers to staff making the required notifications.

The Policy, Procedure and Learning development sub group of the WSCB, has as part of its current work plan, an action to ensure that key messages relating to private

fostering are developed into an 'easy read' user guide or leaflet. Progress on this action will be monitored via WSCB.

Across Walsall Children's Services there is good evidence of regular and timely reminders provided to a wide range of staff regarding their responsibilities in respect of private fostering, for example, the School Admission Team receive input on this at the beginning of every admissions round; key messages relating to private fostering are delivered at the Staff Engagement sessions and at Extended Leadership meetings.

The responsibility for assessment, support and monitoring of private fostering provision is located in the safeguarding and family support service reporting to Group Manager, Karen Johnson. The responsibility for identification is a wider responsibility with the majority of referrals being made by partner agencies. There are a few cases where children's services identify a private fostering arrangement if we become involved in family breakdown situation where children move within their wider network. There are currently 7 known cases of private fostering, this figure can fluctuate between 6-10 cases at any one time.

6. *That a report be submitted to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel providing an update on the performance of the Fostering and Adoption Service post re-structure, in November 2015;*

The re-structure became operational on the 1 April 2015. Since then a number of social workers have left either through retirement or to pursue other career avenues. The service now has three distinct teams. We are currently in the process of under-going phase two of the re-structure to move some functions between teams. A "spend to save" proposal was agreed in the Spring of this year to create three full-time social work posts to enable the completion of family and friend assessments to be done 'in-house'. Following a further submission of an investment proposal the service has been successful in securing an additional four posts. The remit of these posts is contained in **Appendix one**.

All vacant posts across the service have been advertised and we are currently in the middle of the recruitment process. Once all posts are recruited to and some functions have been moved, phase two of the re-structure will be complete. The remit of the new teams can be found in **Appendix two**.

Performance

The adoption service is facing challenges times with very high numbers of children requiring an adoption placement. Since April 2015, 37 children have had an agreed plan of adoption. This is already higher than the total amount of children presented in the previous year, which was 25. The pressure of family finding has resulted in there being less focus on the completion of adoption assessments because the placement of children has had to take priority. So far 6 families have been approved with a further 8 likely to be approved by the end of the year. With regard to performance in relation to children adopted, Walsall is exceeding the England average on the vast majority of key performance indicators. Work is ongoing to reduce the time taken to place children. This will be helped by the post of practice development coordinator.

Fostering

Please see section 8.

7. That Members of the Working Group revisit teams at Essington Lodge in September 2015 to hold a further focus group;

Following the submission of this report, members can identify further areas they would like additional information on and a focus group can then be arranged to facilitate this action. Suggested areas for further work would be the 'Regionalising Adoption Agenda', the importance of direct work to enable children to make successful transitions, and the role that adopters and foster carers can play in the support to new carers and to the Service.

8. That an update on the work being undertaken to reduce the time taken to process foster carer applications be considered by the Panel in November 2015;

The speed of completion of fostering assessments is a challenge for many Local Authorities. The level of expectation was raised in July 2013 with the introduction of an amendment to the assessment and approval of foster carer regulations which split the process of assessment into two stages. This amendment reduced the timeframe in which to complete an assessment. Walsall's average number of days per assessment has fluctuated over recent years. During 2013/14 our average was 377 days, during 2014/15 it was 352 days and figures for this year so far suggest that our current average is 407 days. The reasons for this increase are both general and specific.

In terms of the general reasons:-

- The Fostering Service was reorganised in April 2015. This caused some uncertainty for many workers with some changing teams. Some workers experienced in undertaking fostering assessments left the Recruitment & Assessment Team; some workers with no experience in undertaking fostering assessments joined the team. New workers have taken time to adjust to their new role and to become skilled in completing assessments.
- Management oversight has been difficult as until recently the team only had a part-time practice manager in post and the majority of management time was taken up with the amalgamation of the family and friend's work, most of which is court directed and has had to take priority over planned assessment work.
- We have had a significant level of sickness since April 2015. One worker has just returned from long term sickness and three others are due to have operations soon; all are expected to be off for at least 3 months.
- Mosaic has been introduced. Although Mosaic is an improvement to the previous system, Paris (which did not hold information about fostering and adoption) it is not yet functioning as we would like, largely because children's cases will not be on the system until it goes live on 23rd November 2015. All workers have had to spend time on training courses to learn how to use Mosaic which has impacted on the completion of some key tasks.

In terms of the more specific reasons, 9 foster carers have so far been approved this year. Of these there have been some issues that have caused some delay. These have included:

- significant health issues for applicants and their extended family which has delayed assessments;
- difficulties in engaging with adult birth children of applicants;

- transfer of families in from other areas which have led to questions about their motivation to foster;
- poor literacy skills of applicants; and
- recommendations made by fostering panel where they felt more work was needed prior to recommending them as suitable to foster.

There are currently 19 fostering applications at the assessment stage. Of these, 5 assessments are almost complete and we expect them to be approved soon. Of the other 14, experience would suggest that 5 will be approved this year, 5 approved next year and 4 will not be approved. We therefore estimate that we will approve 19 new foster families in 2015-16, which will be more than we approved last year.

The work currently underway to improve on timeliness for assessments is the increased oversight now being given to the completion of assessments; this is addressed in supervision and also within individual social workers Employee Performance Reviews. There is now an additional social work post in the recruitment and assessment team to provide a clearer focus on the completion of assessments and the responsibility for the support of family and friend carers is moving to the support and development team. This enables the recruitment and assessment team to have a much clearer focus on timeliness of assessments.

9. *That details relating to the number of assessments carried out externally be considered by the Panel together with detail as to how much this process cost the authority and options to bring this service in house;*

The number of assessments commissioned out to external providers is still high. The provider who undertakes the majority of the work have reported a slight decrease in the number of assessments being commissioned. This is mainly as a result of the introduction of new paperwork which lends itself to both fostering and Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) assessments, negating the need to commission separate assessments. Whilst the number of commissioned assessments may have seen a slight decrease, the cost implications have not reduced accordingly. Since April 2015 the cost of commissioned assessments totals £111,725, the projected figure for the end of the financial year is £268,140, which is an increase on last year's total cost of more than £30,000.

Work is still underway with our children's teams on the completion of viability assessments and how these can be improved to either rule people out of the assessment process at an earlier stage or to ensure further information is gathered to contribute to the full assessment.

The three posts to complete the family and friend assessments have been advertised. It is highly likely these posts will be recruited to with a view to them taking on the majority of the work which is currently commissioned. There will still need to be some commissioning of assessments, especially those at distance as it will not be feasible for one of the new posts to complete this as it will take time away from the bulk of the work which is likely to be within the Black Country.

10. *That Foster Carers be consulted through the Foster Care Association to establish their thoughts on the service to ascertain where improvements are required to retain existing carers and attract new ones;*

Since members visited the service and spoke to foster carers, there has been a further three carer consultation events during which ideas were gathered to inform service improvements to the following areas: Staying Put, respite provision and the development of semi-independent provision for young people. There is a further event planned for the 18th November 2015 to consult on the completion of SDQ's (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires), Mosaic and on our new training offer the 'Solihull Approach' to parenting.

Regular liaison meetings take place with the Foster Carer Association and key themes for service development are communicated through their newsletter and also through the monthly communication shot sent to all carers from the service.

11. That family and friends carers be contacted to ask for their feedback on the service after the restructure has been completed to ascertain whether the decision to remove the dedicated team has impacted upon the service they receive. The findings to be reported to the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel in November 2015.

During September 2015, the Group Manager wrote to all family and friend foster carers to ascertain their views on two key areas. These were the loss of the dedicated family and friend team and how we could pursue Special Guardianship for more of our children and young people. 96 letters were sent with a SAE included to encourage a high return by the end of October 2015. To date only four replies have been received. Those who replied spoke highly of the support they had continued to receive from the service although three out of four indicated at least one change of supervising social worker. Three stated that they had been told about the changes to service provision and the fourth indicated that, at the time they were in assessment but would have also appreciated being notified by letter. Two of the four were already pursuing an SGO; one would be considering it in the future and the other young person was already approaching 16 so the carers did not think it was necessary or appropriate. The common theme was that all indicated they would require financial support to pursue an SGO and they felt there should be robust support post Order. Both of these issues are being addressed through the provision of flexible support packages and by ensuring there is a dedicated post for the provision of SGO support.

12. That the Children's Services Scrutiny and Performance Panel receive regular updates on the performance of the recruitment and retention of foster carers together with comparisons with other providers.

There is now a full time Recruitment and Promotions worker in post; they will be tasked with the completion of a quarterly report to the Panel on these issues.

13. That all Members of the Council raise awareness, particularly in terms of short break foster care, in their role as both community representatives and as corporate parents of the Walsall Foster Care offer and actively engage with and encourage interested parties to approach the fostering and adoption recruitment team;

The Panel may wish to consider how they are able to achieve this. The service is able to offer members the opportunity to meet with Sarah Philips, Recruitment and Promotions worker, who can give some advice and support to Members to enable them to raise the profile of fostering.

14. That the recruitment and assessment team visit other authorities to identify ways in which the process could safely be improved to ensure that the speed of the process improves and that an update report be submitted to Panel in November 2015.

Mike Gregory, the Recruitment and Assessment Team Manager, is a member of the West Midlands fostering consortium. This arrangement is used to share practice and discuss national initiatives and the implementation of these into Local Authority practice. Mike is also a member of the national recruitment forum where practice ideas are also shared.

The ongoing re-structure of the service has prevented this work from going much further at this stage. However, we can now utilise the skill and expertise of our Recruitment and Promotions worker to identify Local Authorities outside of the West Midlands region who it may be beneficial for us to visit and discuss improvements to service delivery.

It is important to highlight that whilst there are benefits to comparing ourselves with other Local Authorities who do perform well, we must ensure that they are comparator authorities so there can be like for like discussion as to where we could make service improvements. There is little point in visiting independent fostering providers as their business is limited to the assessment and approval of carers. They do not have the added dimensions of Local Authority practice such as the management of family and friends fostering, private fostering, family finding for children or duty systems to operate.

15. That work be undertaken to establish whether support from the communications team will be sustainable in light of continued budget pressures and assurance be provided that there is a robust marketing strategy in place;

Sarah Philips has already made contact with the central communications team to see how they can assist her in her new role. We envisage that Sarah will undertake the vast majority of marketing and recruitment for Walsall foster carers. She is in the process of completing a business case to agree a marketing budget. Without the provision of a dedicated budget, only minimal marketing activity could be achieved.

16. That work be undertaken to ascertain if there is an alternative way to capture the reasons for resignation by existing foster carers;

Max Gregory, Independent Reviewing Officer for foster carers, has been tasked with bringing together any learning from resignations within the past 12 months and also any learning from disruptions over the same period. He has been asked to devise a questionnaire for carers to complete following a notification of a resignation. The purpose of this is to establish clear reasons for a resignation and whether there is anything that can be done to prevent this, such as additional training or support. The learning will also be used to inform future service development.

17. That work be undertaken with Telford and Wrekin to establish what enables them to be so efficient and apply any subsequent learning to Walsall;

Please see point 14. Telford is not a comparator authority, though we could learn from each other. It is important to add that Telford are about to embark on an Adoption

Regionalising programme with ourselves and other Black Country authorities. This will enable us to engage with them on the wider issue of fostering recruitment. We have asked Sarah Philips to lead on this piece of work with her manager, Mike Gregory.

18. All Members ensure that they attend training sessions to improve their understanding of their role as Corporate Parents

To be considered by the Panel. The most appropriate training would be the "Total Respect" package and arrangements can be made for it to be delivered to Panel Members, as well as those Councillors who are part of the Corporate Parenting Board.

Concluding Comments

The period from January to November 2015 has been a very busy time for the service: we have re-structured, parts of which are still ongoing: Mosaic has been introduced: we have lost some social workers; and sickness levels have been high.

However, there is now a real opportunity to push forward with service improvement with the recent recruitment drive to bring new social workers into the service. The key driver for change continues to be permanency for all children and young people through the provision of high quality robust placements. All new posts and existing ones have to adapt to a culture of promoting permanence for every child and young person at the earliest opportunity.

The current operational priorities are to ensure that all teams are fully staffed, to embed Mosaic and to work with partners on the Regionalising Adoption agenda.

Appendix One

Social worker 1: This post is for the recruitment and assessment of mainstream foster carers and will be located in the Recruitment and Assessment Team. There is clear evidence to suggest that the more internal foster carers we have, the less likely we are to use expensive external providers. This post will contribute to the overall work of the team in increasing our internal foster care provision.

Social worker 2: This post is for family finding for permanence. There are a number of children in Walsall who require permanency outside of their birth family. In order to achieve this we need to ensure we provide a robust family finding service that meets the needs of these children. The responsibility for family finding for permanence will move to the adoption and permanency team where all family finding for adoption and permanent fostering will be located.

Social worker 3: This post is to provide support to foster carers who move through the process to become special guardians. Consultation with carers has highlighted that one of the reasons they do not progress through to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is because they are concerned about the amount of support available. It is essential that carers and the courts have the confidence in the Local Authority to provide robust post-order support.

Practice Development Co-ordinator-Lead for permanence: This post will track and monitor cohorts of children where there is a plan of permanence, where they are subject to the Public Law Outline (PLO) and where we have issued care proceedings, to ensure the plans are progressing in a timely way. This post will also lead on the delivery of workshops, training, briefings and permanency surgeries so that children's social workers are guided and supported in achieving the right outcome for children.

Fostering Recruitment and Assessment team

This team will recruit and assess all new mainstream foster carers; they will then support these carers for the first 12 months of approval. The team will also assess all family and friend carers. Once family and friend carers are approved, they will transfer over to the support and development team. Other duties include the running of skills to foster training course, the running of other internal foster carer training, and all staff rotate both placement duty and also recruitment duty. The team will consist of 1 Team Manager, 1 Practice Manager, 8 FTE social workers, 1 FTE Recruitment and Promotions worker, 1 FTE (Children's Services Support Officer (CSSO) who leads on commissioning and a ½ time CSSO leading on recruitment.

Support and Development Team

This team will support all foster carers throughout the duration of their fostering career. Upon transfer of family and friend foster carers to the team they will work with the carers to transition the family through to an SGO within a 12 month period. The team also undertakes placement duty and contributes to the internal foster carer training programme. The team will consist of 1 Team Manager, 1 Practice Manager and 9 FTE social work posts.

Adoption and Permanency Team

This team will recruit, assess and support all adopters with their adoption journey; the team will also family find for all children with a care plan of adoption or permanent fostering. They will also complete step-parent adoptions and inter-country adoptions. The team will provide support to all adopters and special guardians post order and facilitate the letter box exchange. Other duties include operating a duty rota, running adoption preparation training courses and post adoption training courses, staffing recruitment events as part of our collaborative working with Adoption in the Black Country and Adoption Focus and offer consultancy on adoption issues to wider children's services. The team consists of 1 Team Manager, 1 Practice Manager, 1 life story worker, ½ time direct worker for children and 1 FTE CSSO supporting letter box contact and preparation for adoption placement and 10 FTE social work posts.

The three additional posts for the assessment of family and friend foster carers will be located in the service and will be managed by the practice managers. The practice development coordinator will report directly to the Group Manager in recognition of the tasks involved in this post.