

Committee: Scrutiny

Date:

Wards: All

Subject: Merton Fostering Service

Lead officer: Rachael Wardell, Director of Children, Schools and Families

Lead member: Cllr Kelly Braund

Contact officer: El Mayhew, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion

Recommendations:

A. Members of the panel to discuss and comment on the contents of the report

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. This report was requested by the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel held on 7 October 2019.
- 1.2. Merton's values are that all children have the right to grow up in a safe, loving, family environment. We remain committed to ensuring that children who are unable to live within their family network are provided the very best care by maintaining a diverse group of skilled foster carers. Our foster carers nurture children in our care so they reach their potential, are proud of their cultural identity and have strong ties to their community.
- 1.3. Merton currently has 80 in-house foster carers who care for 44% of our children in care. Merton's fostering support to our carers is of a good quality. This is highlighted by our success at retaining carers and recruitment through word-of-mouth.
- 1.4. Although Fostering is a regulated activity, suitable private providers, registered with Ofsted, are permitted to recruit, assess and support foster carers to sell their placements to local authorities. These are referred to as Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA).
- 1.5. The overall budget for children's placements is overspent. The strategic rationale to reduce this by increasing our numbers of in-house foster carers is clear when comparing the average weekly cost for a child living with in-house carers (£432) as opposed to independent fostering agencies (£908) or residential homes (£3865).
- 1.6. Our annual recruitment target is 20 new foster carers and we are currently projecting to achieve 15. Since the start of the performance year 2019/20 the corporately held budget available for fostering recruitment has been repurposed to develop digital platforms. Whilst there is a belief that a greater focus on digital marketing to recruit prospective foster carers may be more productive and cost effective, the impact of this strategy and the reduction in other forms of recruitment activity requires assessment in the upcoming year.

2 CHILDREN, SCHOOLS & FAMILIES

2.1. FOSTERING SERVICE

2.2. There are two teams within the Fostering Service:

- Fostering Recruitment and Assessment team
- Fostering Supervision and Support team.

2.3. The Fostering Recruitment and Assessment team undertakes the recruitment and assessment of prospective foster carers, Connected Person's and Special Guardianship assessments. Connected Person's and Special Guardianship assessments are most often assessments of family members and friends who are in the network of a child in our care or at risk of coming into our care. It is a statutory duty to arrange for children to be cared for by suitable members of the child's network.

2.4. The Fostering Supervision and Support team has responsibility for the supervision, training, support and reviewing of approved foster carers to ensure that children living with carers are safe and have their individual needs met. This team is responsible for facilitating a 'Merton Fostering community' so that carers can access peer support, collaborate, celebrate achievements and enjoy social activities together.

2.5. As at December 2019, there were 80 foster carers registered with the London Borough of Merton (77 approved foster carers, 2 Connected Persons carers and 1 Foster to Adopt carer. There were 3 vacancies (2 for children aged 0-11 and 1 for 12+ years).

2.6. The ethnicity of our foster carers is White (44%), Black Caribbean and African (40%); 7% are Asian. This reflects the ethnic profile of children in our care. 57% of our foster carers live in Merton, 17% live in Sutton, 15% live in Croydon and 3% live in Lambeth. 7.5% of Merton foster carers are aged 30+ years, 20% are aged 40+ years, 45% of Merton's foster carers are aged 50+ years, 20% are aged 60+ years, and 7.5% are aged 70+ years.

2.7. Fostering Recruitment uses a mix of marketing channels to raise awareness for our need for new foster carers. Our annual marketing strategy includes advertising in My Merton, local newspapers and using street banners and poster campaigns across the borough. We host fostering Information sessions bi-monthly at Pizza Express in Wimbledon and Coco Beanz Café in Morden and these continue to be a very cost effective way to raise awareness for Merton Fostering.

2.8. Our fostering recruitment publicity materials have been rebranded and we distribute these across the borough during each year to maintain visible presence. We have continued to build on our social media presence using our Merton Fostering Facebook page and the council's social media channels. Word-of-mouth recommendations continue to be a key recruiting channel and we have seen a steady number of IFA foster carers transferring to Merton's Fostering Service. Our support and retention activities are critical to maintaining positive word-of-mouth recommendations.

- 2.9. Our retention strategy is focussed on provide a high quality support, social opportunities, celebrations and recognition activities.
- 2.10. Once approved, foster carers are allocated a supervising social worker to offer them support, guidance and supervision. Every new carer is matched with a mentor, usually an experienced foster carer, to offer peer support. Our comprehensive training programme, delivered through both day and evening events, is designed to offer learning and reflection opportunities to develop our foster carers knowledge and skills. The training offer includes places at joint training with social workers on courses organised by the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership (MSCP). Together with our Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) colleagues, we have introduced Empathic Parenting training to our foster carers to develop their understanding of the impact of trauma on children in care. This year e-learning has been introduced for carers who find it difficult to access our day and evening courses.
- 2.11. Throughout the year, we organise activities to celebrate the achievements of our foster carers. In the summer we hold our Annual Foster Carers Dinner and Awards Ceremony and a Christmas Party in December. In October, the Service and Merton fostering community celebrate our diversity during Black History month. These events are always attended by senior council officers and either a Councillor or the Mayor.
- 2.12. These activities cement the department's relationship with foster carers valuing the contribution they make in the lives of our children. In addition, we support the Merton Foster Carers Association who run support groups, functions and activities for foster carers and their children.
- 2.13. Retention of foster carers is good in Merton, over the last three years, 13 foster carers have resigned as follows:
- 2017: 5 resigned – 2 retired and 3 left for family reasons.
 - 2018: 2 resigned – 1 was granted an Special Guardianship order for their foster child and 1 resigned for work reasons
 - 2019: 6 carers resigned – 1 was granted a Special Guardianship Order for their foster child, a named child placement ended when the young person reached 18 years, 2 retired and 2 resigned for work reasons.

3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

NO SPECIFIC IMPLICATIONS FOR THIS REPORT

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 4.1. Part of the Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion Division's savings plan 2020/21 is to review and amend the allowances and fees paid to foster carers, adopters and special guardians. A public consultation about the proposed changes is being planned. The Service will seek feedback from carers about their experiences of the current scheme and the changes they would like. Merton's foster carers are currently paid a fee (according to their

skill set) and an allowance for the child/young person which is based on the child's age.

5 TIMETABLE

N/a for this report.

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1. Currently, we have a projected overspend to our placements budget of £1,540,252 for the 2019/20 financial year. The average weekly cost of one of our children living with in-house foster carers is £432 as opposed to £908 when they live with IFA foster carers.
- 6.2. The financial benefit of increasing our in-house capacity is clear. Residential Children's Homes have an average weekly cost of £3865. Whilst there will always be some children whose best interests are met outside a family setting, our plan is to invest in the recruitment, retention and development of skilled in-house foster carers so that the Fostering Service can meet the needs of children with complex needs.
- 6.3. The Fostering Recruitment marketing budget held corporate services has been re-purposed to deliver a digital platform, reducing available funds from £14,000 to £6,000 for 2019/20. Whilst a Digital Marketing Campaign may be more cost effective than previous recruitment activity the Fostering Service will review and feedback to corporate services colleagues the impact this approach has had on recruitment performance.
- 6.4. Local authority fostering services compete with other Boroughs and IFA in the recruitment of prospective foster carers. Sustained recruitment activity is required to stimulate and reach a wide group of people who may be interested in fostering. Physical publicity campaigns are an important way of raising awareness of fostering and 'sowing the seed' in people's thinking about what they might be able to offer. The service is concerned that a reduction in the budget available for such campaigns may lead to a reduction in recruitment.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. The Fostering Service operates under the Fostering Services Regulation 2011 and the National Minimum Standards 2011. To ensure children are safeguarded, all our foster carers and their household members (over the age of 18 years) have up to date Disclosure and Barring Service checks, medicals and safer caring policies.
- 7.2. We conduct monthly visits to all foster carers when they have a child living with them, and three monthly when there is no child placed with them. Twice a year we undertake unannounced visits for the purpose of robust quality assurance that carers are providing a safe and caring environment for our children.
- 7.3. Each carer has an annual review of the continued suitability to foster which is chaired by the Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO). The FIRO is based in the Children's Social Care Quality Assurance Service in order to operate independently of the Fostering Service. The reviews ensure that

foster carers continue to meet the requirements for fostering approval and the National Minimum Standards. In line with the Fostering Services Regulation 2011, the first, and then every third, annual review is represented to the Fostering Panel for their consideration as to continued suitability of the carer to foster.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. Children have a right to grow up in a family setting, safe from abuse, where they are loved, nurtured and develop to their full potential. For most children, the best people to provide this is their parents and extended family and it is a priority of Merton Children's Services that families are supported to safely care for their children before alternative care arrangements are made.
- 8.2. Article 20 of the UN Convention on the rights of a child states that '*If a child cannot be looked after by their immediate family, the government must give them special protection and assistance. This includes making sure the child is provided with alternative care that is continuous and respects the child's culture, language and religion*'.
- 8.3. As corporate parents we seek, wherever possible, to match our children in care with families who reflect their race, culture, language and religion. The vast majority of our foster carers live within the borough or in close proximity enabling children to maintain a connection to their local community, friends and schools. We know that a sense of identity and belonging is important to a child's well-being. The larger our numbers of in-house foster carers, the more options we will have available to offer children and young people.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. None

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. None

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 12.1. Web links to Statutory Guidance on Fostering Services and National Minimum Standards
 - <https://www.gov.uk/.../fostering-services-national-minimum-standards>
 - <https://ukfostering.org.uk/fostering-information/fostering-regulations>

