

Corporate Parenting Board

Commissioning arrangements for independent
fostering agency placements

Date of Meeting: 9 December 2019

Portfolio Holder: Cllr A Parry, Children, Education and Early Help

Director: Sarah Parker, Executive Director of People - Children

Executive Summary: Commissioning arrangements for independent fostering agency placements

Equalities Impact Assessment:

There are no equalities impact implications arising from this report.

Budget:

N/A

Risk Assessment:

Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: MEDIUM

Residual Risk MEDIUM

Climate implications: None

Other Implications:

None

Recommendation: For the Corporate Parenting Board to note the contents of this report.

Reason for Recommendation: This report is for information.

Appendices:

Background Papers: None

Officer Contact:

Name: Claire Shiels, Acting Corporate Director, Commissioning and Partnerships

Tel: 01305 224682

Email: claire.shiels@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Commissioning Arrangements for Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) Placements

1. Introduction

1.1 Dorset Council has worked in partnership with consortiums of other local authorities to commission IFA placements through tendered frameworks for a number of years now and is currently a member of the South Central Consortium of 14 local authorities comprising: Southampton City Council (Procurement lead), Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council (Contract management coordination lead), Bracknell Forest Council, Dorset Council, Isle of Wight Council, Oxfordshire County Council, Portsmouth City Council, Reading Borough Council – Brighter Futures for Children, Slough Children's Services Trust, Surrey County Council, The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, West Berkshire Council and Wokingham Borough Council. Collaborative working through consortiums shares the workload of tendering and provides greater economies of scale for providers to offer competitive placement fees.

1.2 The South-Central Consortium's tendered IFA framework commenced on 1st April 2017 and is due to expire on 31st March 2021, proposals for a successor to this framework are being drafted for the consideration of the member local authorities. The initial tender process resulted in 49 Providers being appointed to the framework. The current number of providers is 50. In the course of the contract 3 Providers terminated the agreement, 2 mergers took place, and 6 new Providers joined as part of the annual Framework re-opening.

1.3 The aim of the framework has been through a compliant procurement route to provide children and young people with family placements as close to their area of origin as possible and for the IFAs on the framework to provide high quality, good value for money placements that:

- Improve stability and reduce the likelihood of placement moves;
- Offer children and young people the opportunity to maintain stable local networks and contact with their families by providing care that is local to their homes, and is 'fit for purpose';
- Meet the diverse range of needs of children and young people;

- IFAs to work effectively in partnership with the Councils, Partner agencies and other professionals to ensure all available resources are used to achieve positive outcomes.

1.4 The vast majority of Dorset's IFA placements have been made through agencies on the current framework or previous South West framework. A small number of IFA placements have been made through other Ofsted registered agencies not yet on the South-Central Framework where it wasn't possible to find the right placement at the time the placement was needed.

1.5 All Independent Fostering Agencies are inspected under the Social Care Common Inspection Framework (SCCIF) and therefore they are obligated to comply within the same regulatory framework as that of all local authority fostering services which includes inspections by the regulator Ofsted.

2. Contract Management

2.1 The current contract management arrangements work at two levels:

- Consortium-wide and
- Individual local authority level.

2.2. The consortium-wide contract management is carried out by Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council (BCP) who carry out quarterly monitoring of key performance indicators (i.e. Unplanned endings of placements, any termination of placements not complying with the contractual obligation to provide 28-day notice in writing, any allegations of misconduct, general feedback). BCP also collate placement data from IFAs and share this with consortium members and holding contract reviews with each provider. In addition to the key performance indicators mentioned above, annual reviews also cover feedback from social workers and independent reviewing officers on how well placements are meeting the needs of individual children or young people.

2.3. As an individual local authority within the Consortium, Dorset Council makes placements from providers on the framework, establishes individual placement agreements negotiates fees and liaises with IFAs about forthcoming vacancies and alerts them to areas where carers are needed. In addition, children's social workers visit them regularly in placement and carry out looked after children reviews. The Placements team are notified of any concerns about the quality of the placement so these issues can be followed up with the provider and appropriate action taken.

3. Placement Sufficiency

3.1 While it is sometimes necessary to place children some distance from their home, either for their own protection or to access specialist services, in most cases, placement closer to home will enable a child to maintain contact with

family and friends, continue at their existing school, and continue access any specialist support services. However, only around 20% of independently provided placements (both in children's homes and fostering) are provided within Dorset. This pattern suggests that some determined engagement with the market might be able to either bring providers into Dorset or unlock existing provision in Dorset so that the number of children placed within the local authority can increase.

3.2 At the time of writing of our current total of 102 IFA placements with 21 different IFAs, 29 are in Dorset and 24 are the Bournemouth, Christchurch, Poole Council area and there are 50 in other local authority areas. We have 29 placements made on the South-Central framework and 53 made through the previous South West framework and 20 spot purchased placements (i.e. IFA placements made from Ofsted Registered providers not on either framework).

4. Market Development

4.1 This autumn Dorset Council held a market engagement event for independent providers of placements for children (IFAs and Children's Homes). There were useful conversations at this event and discussions with IFAs covering topics such as: offering more, local placements to Dorset Council, possible links between residential placements and step-down to fostering provision, effective working relationships, recruitment and retention of carers, early notification of vacancies and planned placement moves, training, feasibility (or not) of retaining carers for emergency placements.

4.2 Providers would welcome further market engagement events and an opportunity to build on existing working relationships with Dorset's Children's Services Commissioners and Placements and Brokerage team.