

People and Health Scrutiny Committee

14 March 2022

Foster Carer Recruitment

For Review and Consultation

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

Local Councillor(s):

Executive Director: T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

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Report Status: Public

Recommendation:

That the People and Health Scrutiny Committee note the impact and support the work being undertaken by the fostering service to address the challenges of foster carer recruitment.

That the People and Health Scrutiny Committee provide challenge and support to strengthen the impact and outcomes going forward.

Reason for Recommendation:

To respectfully ask the committee for their observations and challenge on the planned work being undertaken to increase foster carer recruitment

1. Executive Summary

1.1 This report outlines the planning and strategy of the fostering service to address the current issues in respect of foster carer recruitment. The recruitment of foster carers nationally is currently a significant issue with an estimation by the Fostering Network (2021) that 7,300 fostering families are required nationally with 720 of those needed in the South West. There are three elements to consider.

- Replacing those who leave the fostering workforce every year.
- The increase in the number of children in care.

- Increasing the size of the pool of available foster carers. (The provision of specific placements for teenagers, sibling groups, disabled children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in particular).

It should be noted that nationally 13% of the foster carer workforce are retiring or leaving every year.

From the perspective of Dorset there are currently:

- 194 approved foster carers of which 133 (68.6%) are mainstream foster carers.
- 440 children in care with 193 placed with in house carers equating to a utilisation rate of one.

2. Financial Implications

2.1 With 440 children and young people in care, Dorset foster carers only provide placements to 43.9%. The cost implications are therefore significant for the local authority in three key areas.

- Additional cost of independent fostering association placements
- Additional cost of residential placements
- Additional costs associated with time and travel for children and young people's social workers where placements are out of county.

3. Well-being and Health Implications

3.1 Providing a stable, nurturing, carefully matched and local placement is a clear goal and aspiration for every child and young person who comes into care. Placement stability, achieving strong outcomes for children and young people and achieving reunification are all greatly improved through the provision of local placements. Of particularly relevance to the emotional wellbeing of children and young people is maintaining keeping in touch with family and friends which is achieved far more successfully if a placement is within Dorset.

4. Climate implications

4.1 There are no implications

5. Risk Assessment

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

Current Risk: Low
Residual Risk: Low

6. Equalities Impact Assessment

Not applicable

7. Appendices

Not applicable

8. Background

- 8.1.** In 2018 the Fostering Service began working with Whitehead Ross Education and Consulting to recruit mainstream foster carers. The role of WREC had been to work with the fostering service and corporate communications service to produce and implement a fostering recruitment strategy, receive enquiries from the public about becoming a foster carer, undertaking initial home visits where appropriate and encourage suitable prospective foster carers to apply to foster. The contract with WREC expired at the end of May 2021 and a decision was made to revert to the recruitment process being delivered in-house.
- 8.2.** A decision was made during the pandemic to focus on online and digital recruitment with face-to-face recruitment stopped.

9. Recruitment aims and objectives

9.1 The key aims of the current strategy are:

- To improve local placement choice and stability for children and young people in Dorset, particularly for teenagers.
- To increase the number of black and minority ethnic foster carers.
- To increase the number of in-house placements and reduce the usage of independent fostering agencies and residential care
- To provide an effective, high quality and best value fostering service to meet the needs and numbers of the looked after population
- To ensure that all people who are interested in becoming foster carers are welcomed without prejudice, responded to promptly and given clear information about recruitment, assessment, approval and support services.

10. Enquiries

10.1 Last calendar year there have been 235 enquiries which progressed to 104 initial visits and the recruitment of 19 fostering households.

The Fostering Network estimates that on average one out of ten enquiries progress to approval as foster carers.

To ensure the conversion rate is as high as possible it is vital that:

- Enquirers are welcomed positively, provided with a personal service and responded to within 24 hours.
- Prospective carers are given clear, engaging verbal and written information that highlights what Dorset Council Fostering can offer at every touch point with a consistent message.
- The application process is smooth and efficient with fostering carers approved with 26 weeks where possible

11. Research

11.1 There are a limited number of people wishing to become foster carers and a key consideration for Dorset Council is the competition for those people that it faces primarily from independent fostering organisations, but also from the neighbouring local authorities. Understanding why carers are motivated to join a particular organisation is therefore key to any recruitment strategy. An important piece of research by the Fostering Network “Why carers Care” 2015 identified two primary factors that determine which organisation a foster carer chooses to join.

- The support that is offered.
- The organisation was recommended

11.2 A study conducted in 2013 by Scott and Duncan for the Department of Education explored attitudes, motivations and barriers to adoption and fostering. Some key findings from the research include:

- One in five adults may have some interest in fostering or adopting in the future
- Many myths need dispelling – people are quick to rule themselves out for many reasons including age, being single, being a smoker or overweight
- Messaging must be simple and clear to understand what kind of applicants we are looking for, how the application process works, what support is available and what kind of children need fostering
- Communication must also illustrate the benefits to the individual as well as society

11.3 It also revealed characteristics of people who are predisposed to fostering. These include people who are:

- Involved in altruistic activities (e.g., have done voluntary work, are active in their local community).
- Have previous experience of fostering or adoption (i.e., have adopted a child or know someone who has, were fostered as a child etc.)
- Actively practice a religion
- Work in higher managerial, intermediate managerial, skilled manual work (particularly those who currently work for a not-for-profit organisation and/or in healthcare) as well as carers.

11.4 A further piece of research by the Fostering Network, “Why Carers Care” 2015 was based on Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need. Maslow classified people into three categories.

- a. Settlers (Sustenance driven)
- b. Prospectors (Outer driven)
- c. Pioneers (Inner driven)

The research found that 73% of foster carers were classified as “Pioneers”. Pioneers have a strong desire for fairness, a keen sense of what is right or wrong and are concerned about society. They are self-assured, have a high level of self-efficacy and will be the first to respond to what they see as a moral call to action. To engage and influence Pioneers it is therefore imperative to involve them and provide space for questions and discussion, so they may fully determine themselves whether something is right or fair.

- 11.5** In terms of the age profile of people becoming foster carers, a report by the Fostering Network on Why Foster Carers Care in 2015 revealed the following information:

Age profile of newly approved foster carers in 2014 (recruited nationally)

20-24	0.6%
25-34	10.2%
35-44	32.1%
45-54	40.7%
55-64	15.7%
65-74	0.6%
75+	0%

This suggests that 45-54 is the most common age to become a foster carer and that people aged 35-54 should be the primary target demographic for recruiting new carers.

There may however be scope to increase the number of people fostering between the ages of 55-64 given the aging population and when seeking carers for older teenagers as it is often people who have parented teenagers who are more confident in their ability to help this age group.

Of significance is also consideration of how social media has become the primary means of communication for a vast percentage of the population.

- 11.6** Research commissioned by the communication team showed the following motivations for fostering: Foster carers grew up with foster children, wanted a big family or sibling for own family or had difficulties having their own children.

12. Planned marketing activity

- 12.1** Colleagues in the Communications team are working closely with us on the marketing strategy for foster carer recruitment. We have commissioned an external marketing agency who are currently redesigning Dorset Council's fostering image, producing a new insights-led campaign and, working with colleagues in IT, a new micro-site. The agency has experience of working with other local authorities and have run a number of successful fostering campaigns. This work will be completed by end of April 2022 and will ensure that Dorset Council fostering is competitive and highlights to both individuals considering

fostering and foster carers currently with other agencies the benefits of fostering with Dorset Council.

As interim lead generation activity, we have been running targeted Google advertising since after Christmas and through to end of March 2022.

12.2 Insights on messages and imagery for Dorset so far from the marketing agency include:

- Lead with local is best – keeping children in their school, close to their friends and near to birth families and focus on the idea of home and belonging in a family.
- Make it 100% child focused. Foster carers don't see themselves as heroes.
- It is not a career – £700 a week adverts upset older foster children who interpret it as 'is this all I am worth?'.
- Make it real – imagery and messaging win over fancy fonts and distracting gifs with use of a photography style to tell a story those considering fostering can relate to
- Portray a mix of ages, backgrounds and abilities.

12.3 We are putting new systems in place to monitor the results of marketing activity and the number and quality of enquiries generated. This insight will be used to continually refine the marketing activity.

12.4 Fostering is something that people think about for a number of months or years before they contact an organisation. Our marketing activity will aim to support people along their consideration journey, providing useful information, inspiration and advice to help them decide whether to pursue foster care.

12.4 Traditionally recruitment methodology was focussed on face-to-face situations such as libraries and local events. More recently, due to the pandemic, we have focused on digital recruitment, but it is clearly evidenced that both methodologies are required. The recent lack of face-to-face recruitment has led to Dorset Council failing to have a significant 'footprint' within the county. Addressing this is key and from November to December 2021 six events were held leading to a doubling in the number of enquiries compared to October.

12.5 Our marketing strategy going forwards includes:

- a. The use of social media and digital communication to reach target audiences in a targeted and measurable way.
- b. A programme of face-to-face events including informal 'cuppa with a foster carer'
- c. The continued use of a referral scheme for existing foster carers with a financial reward for referrals that result in the recruitment of a new foster carer.

- d. To work in partnership with The Fostering Network during 'Foster Care Fortnight' (10th – 22nd May 2022).
 - e. Clear messaging about what it is like to foster with Dorset Council, the need for certain types of foster carers and reframing as a local issue.
 - f. A greater use of existing foster carers to take part in promotions and act as advocates for the service.
- 12.6** The marketing agency suggests that the value proposition statement is 'Our fostering service helps children in care stay close to home by recruiting foster carers from their local communities who can offer a loving, stable home where they can flourish'.
- 12.7** Future marketing activity will carry the new strapline 'Foster with Dorset Council' to emphasise the value of fostering for the local council (as opposed to independent fostering agencies), which we know resonates with our target audience.
- 12.8** In order to measure the success, it is imperative that key data is collected to identify any potential learning and to ensure that the most cost-effective aspects of the strategy are being utilised to their full potential. This is a key aspect of the strategy and will inform any future work.

13. Summary

- 13.1** The strategy outlines the methodology and theory to address the critical shortfall in Dorset fostering households. The shortfall is currently impacting upon outcomes for children, stretching an already challenged service and group of carers and is having a significant impact upon financial resources. The strategy outlined has a comparatively low-cost implication and focusses on utilising current resources and maximising current technological advances. It is based upon current research and highlights the need to continually gather information so that future marketing strategies are fully informed and can be adapted as required.
- It is critical that there is awareness of how competitive the market is and that any advertising campaign has to be focussed and direct and has the ability to evolve as required.

Footnote:

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.