



Report to Children's and Education Select Committee

Date: 20 January 2022

Title: Fostering, Adoption and Special Guardianship Order

Author: Sandra Carnall, Head of Service for Children's Care Service and Children's Commissioning.

Recommendations:

For members of the Select Committee to note (a) the placement options for looked after children and (b) the progress made against our Placement Sufficiency Strategy.

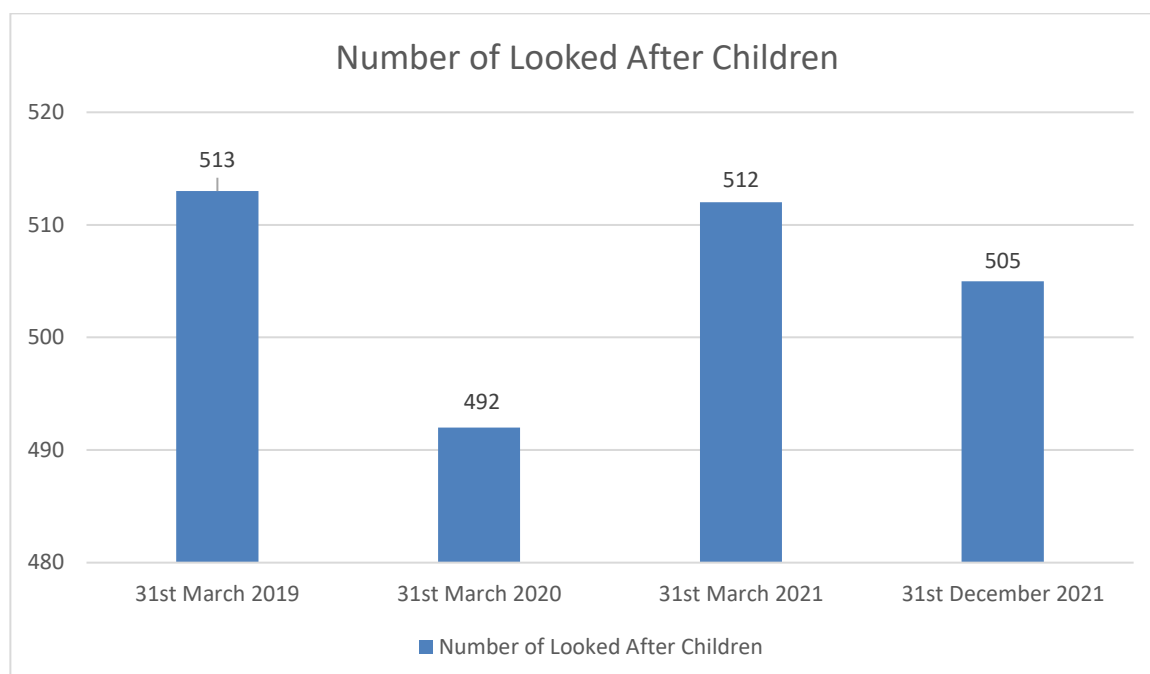
1. Background and introduction

1.1 Within Children's Services, the inhouse placements service includes separate teams for foster carers and adopters. Each team currently has a recruitment team, family finders and placement support workers. Their roles have adapted with the increase in the number of special guardianship orders that have been granted and this work is currently completed across both teams. In addition to these two teams, we also operate 4 in-house children's homes and one semi-independent unit.

1.2 Whilst the pandemic has significantly impacted the service, we have also learnt about alternative ways to engage carers and young people which has been positive. Our children's homes have remained open throughout the pandemic and have put in place extensive plans to respond to the virus. We have, however, seen a significant increase in the number of foster carers, adopters and special guardians requesting support as a result of the additional pressures they are experiencing through Covid. This was particularly noticeable when schools closed.

2. Fostering and Adoption Team Performance

2.1 Despite the COVID 19 challenges, the number of our children in care has remained consistently between 490 and 520 for the last 3 years. We have, however, seen an increase in children with complex needs requiring high-cost packages of care.



3. Fostering

3.1 As shown in the table below, over the last two years we have made good progress in relation to fostering placements for our looked after children. We want to build on this success and further increase our in-house capacity to improve local placement choices for looked after children, reducing our reliance on independent and more costly placements.

	31-Mar 2019	31-Mar 2020	31-Mar 2021
Number of looked after children	513	492	512
Number and % of children in care living with foster families	342 67%	350 71%	360 70%
Number and % of children placed with a Buckinghamshire /in house carer	155 45%	189 54%	186 51%
Number and % of children placed with an Independent Fostering Agency	187 55%	161 46%	174 48%
Number and % of children in care living outside the local authority area	272 53%	227 46%	270 53%

3.2 We have consistently placed 70% of our looked after children in foster placements this year which is in line with the national average. This year, we are focusing on the recruitment of carers who are able to provide care for sibling groups and parent and child placements.

3.3 Our current recruitment strategy considers the learning from the last 3 years to ensure that we are targeting carers who are committed to caring for our children in the short and long term. In addition, our recruitment campaigns this year alongside our social media campaigns have included holding an event in the Eden Shopping Centre, High Wycombe. Our third 'it takes a village' event focused on recruiting carers and adopters who could care for siblings. Cuppa and Cake with a carer; an informal session when prospective

carers have the opportunity to meet informally with some of our experienced carers. In the last quarter the number of enquiries has started to decline, we are continuing to consider new and innovative recruitment events/campaigns.

- 3.4 The fostering team are in the process of submitting a bid to the Service Innovation Board for funding for a readiness checker, similar to the one we have implemented for adoption. If the bid is successful, we aim to implement this from autumn 2022. Research indicates that other Local Authorities who have adopted this approach have had the same level of success as our adoption team.

4. Fostering recruitment 2019 – 2021

Year	Number of Approvals	Mainstream fostering placements generated	Respite
2019 - 2020	22 households	27	5 respite carers
2020 - 2021	21 households	27	2 respite carers
2021 – Dec 2021	11 households	19	2 respite carers
Booked at panel between Jan 2022 – Mar 2022	8 households	16	0

- 4.1 We currently have 155 fostering households (including respite only carers) caring for 196 children. We now have more children placed with our inhouse provision than independent fostering agencies (180). This has not been the case previously. With the expected growth in the number of fostering households, we need to increase the fostering support team with 2 additional fostering social workers in line with our recruitment and retention strategy.
- 4.2 Last year we were successful in securing two funding bids from the Department for Education (DfE). The first to set up a Mockingbird project. The research indicates that this model of foster care improves outcomes for children by improving the stability of foster placements. The current bid includes all of the set-up fees and we have received an early indication that the DfE will cover the costs for the second year. At this point, we will review the project to ensure the objectives have been met and to consider whether we continue with the project. The second bid is a one-off payment of £20,000 to provide intensive therapeutic support to six children who are at risk of placement breakdown. We are working closely with the children in care team to identify the children who will benefit from the intensive support.

5. Adoption

5.1 Our adoption team has continued to see a high level of registrations of interest. A successful social media recruitment campaign and delivery of training for staff and adopters has ensured that we continue to provide a high-quality service. Last year, the post order team worked with the corporate digital services team to develop a readiness checker to help engage potential adopters. This year, we will be building on the success of this project to complete a second digital project to raise awareness of our offer earlier to reduce adoption and Special Guardian Order breakdowns. The team have also expanded their support offer through the adoption support fund. This has enabled upskilling of staff and implementation of more specialist support groups to ensure all adopters and special guardians are able to access support which reflects their needs. The adoption support fund is currently agreed until March 2022, we await the outcome from the DfE regarding whether this will be extended, or the application criteria changed.

6. Adoption data

Date	Adopters Recruited	Children Adopted	Special Guardianship Orders Granted
2019/2020	11	24	33
2020/2021	30	26	23
2021 – Dec 2021	13	18	19
In progress	5	-	-

6.1 We currently have 235 children who are subject to a special guardianship order (SGO) and 147 adopted children who continue to receive means tested financial support from the Local Authority.

6.2 The Post Order team is working with 171 children, this work includes assessment of needs, life story work, direct work and play therapy. They are also monitoring the therapeutic packages that have been commissioned from the adoption support fund.

6.3 Nationally, the number of children being placed for adoption has dropped over the last 3 years. We have not experienced a decline in children being placed for adoption. Our Early Permanence work has been a strength, with 8 babies this year being placed with Early Permanence carers.

7. Next steps and priorities

- 7.1 Permanence remains a central focus across the service. Our aim is to ensure that whenever possible young people are placed in long-term placements (long-term fostering, adoption and special guardianship) which are able to effectively meet their needs. We have over the last 2 years increased resources focused on family finding and matching to help us identify the best matches for young people.
- 7.2 Review the current structure of the fostering and adoption teams to ensure that all children receive a high quality of service, embed learning from working in the pandemic and changes to practice that have enhanced service delivery and ensuring that we maximise the staffing resources available to provide a service that can meet the needs of our children now and in the future.
- 7.3 Build on the joint work with housing colleagues to enhance the social housing options for care leavers that will complement our staying put offer.
- 7.4 Increase the capacity of the fostering panel to ensure we are able to maximise the opportunities for children to be matched long term with their carers in a timelier way.
- 7.5 Secure funding for an Independent Reviewing Officer to provide independent oversight and scrutiny for foster carers household reviews.
- 7.6 Develop clear processes and protocols for relatives/foster carers who would like to pursue a special guardianship order and ensure we have a robust support offer in place.