



Report to the Education, Skills and Children's Services Select Committee

Title: Fostering

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Report signed off by Cabinet Member: Angela MacPherson, Children and Young People

Electoral divisions affected: All

Purpose of Agenda Item:

Information:

This item is intended to provide members of the select committee the opportunity to consider some of the key issues facing the provision of sufficient fostering places for those children and young people in the care of Buckingham County Council. It should be read in conjunction with the report on adoption, which is also on the agenda of this committee.

Background

Background information on fostering and what it involves is set out in appendix A of the report.



The 1989 requires local authorities to "take reasonable steps to secure, so far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of looked after children in their local authority area, otherwise known as the sufficiency duty".

According to the Fostering Network, there is a shortage of 10,000 Foster carers across the UK.

The government has undertaken a number of changes to improve fostering services, including the introduction of the foster carers charter, changes to regulations to make fostering easier and quicker, and revisions to national minimum standards. A number of proposals have been announced to help local authorities to recruit more foster carers, including making fostering more compatible for working families, and encouraging employers to be more fostering friendly. The government is also consulting on changes to make assessment and approval quicker and more transparent, and providing better support and training to foster carers.

Summary

- Buckinghamshire County Council has around 450 children in care at the current time. Buckinghamshire, like many local authorities since the baby Peter Connelly case have witnessed a significant rise in the number of looked after children. Numbers have increased here by nearly 20% since March 2011 when there were 381 children looked after.
- Despite this, Buckinghamshire still has fewer children per 1000 population (0-17) than its comparator group, according to 2013 CIPFA benchmarking data. Buckinghamshire has 3.4 children per 1000 population compared with the benchmark average of 4.3 children. Buckinghamshire is the seventh lowest out of nine.
- There are more boys in care (54%) than girls (46%). Around 11% of children have a disability. There are similar numbers of children looked after in each of the age groups between 0 to 14 (around 20), but more than twice as many children in the 15 to 17 age bands. In the last three years, the greatest demand for placements has been for young children aged under five and teenagers 14 or over.
- Nearly 16% of children are placed in residential settings (children's homes of residential schools provided either by the local authority or by independent sector providers). This is around twice as many as the authorities deemed to be similar to Buckinghamshire by CIPFA.
- 64% of children are placed in Foster care placements provided by the local authority or by independent fostering agencies. This is broadly similar overall to comparator authorities. However, Buckinghamshire places 37% of its looked after children in the independent sector fostering provision, compared with a 27% average in comparator authorities.

- This means that approximately only one in four looked after children are placed with the in-house fostering service in Buckinghamshire, compared with around one in three in comparator authorities.
- Of the remaining children, 13% are placed with family and friends ("kinship placements") and parents, and 5% are placed for adoption. The remainder are placed in independent living up placements.
- Critically, less than 50% of looked after children are now placed within the County Council boundary, with many children being placed considerable distances away from their families, schools, and communities.
- In total in March 2014, there were only 282 places with 205 carers across all sectors to look after the 470 children in our care. i.e.

No of Children placed by Bucks	Bucks CC* (No Carers in brackets)	IFA's
In County mainstream	95 (83)	152
In County – family and friends	24 (17)	0
Out of County Mainstream	6 (10)	29
Out of County family and friends	7 (6)	0
TOTAL	132	181

- The local authority fostering service was judged to be good when inspected by OFSTED in June 2012. Feedback from Foster carers as part of the biannual service user survey shows high levels of satisfaction with the in-house service, with none evaluated as poor by Foster carers and many elements such as training and support evaluated as excellent.
- The number of mainstream foster carers registered with Buckinghamshire county council has increased in three of the last four years (in 2012/13 there was no overall change in numbers) to 93 mainstream carers in total, as has the overall number of "bed nights" provided by the service. However, the net increase over that period has been small (+10 carers) and has been much too small to prevent the significant growth in the use of independent sector fostering placements.
- So far in 2013/14, there have been 194 enquiries about fostering (including Facebook enquiries) and 12 foster carer approvals. The County of Bucks has a population of 505,000 people, according to the 2011 census and there are around 200,000 households. This makes an enquiry rate of less than one per thousand households.

PERFORMANCE CRITERIA	NATIONAL AVERAGE	PERFORMANCE IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
Conversion rate from enquiry to approval	11%	6.2%
Utilisation of in-house Foster carers	69%	87%
Journey from initial enquiry to first panel	281 days	189 days
Foster service attrition rates (loss of carers)	13%	9.6%

- Buckinghamshire's conversion rate from enquiry to approval appears lower than the national average, although there is some controversy over the definition of an "enquiry". For example, Buckinghamshire's data includes information requests on Facebook, whereas other authorities don't. More in house placements are being used in Buckingham than elsewhere. The service approves foster care much more quickly than the national average and loses fewer foster carers per year.
- The age profile of the in-house Foster carers is such that 57% are aged over 50, with 28% aged over 60.
- According to data gathered by the commissioning team in 2012, the in-house service is able to provide places for less than half of the looked after population, compared with 82% in Oxfordshire, 96% in Hertfordshire, and 76% in Milton Keynes.

Resource implications

- The impact of the increased numbers of looked after children over the last three years has meant an increased budget spend of over £5 million between 2011 and 2014 (spend has increased from £12.3 million to £17.5 million).
- The average yearly cost per child per week in care in Buckinghamshire is £906. The average across the nine CIPFA comparator authorities is £846. This is almost entirely explained by the higher percentage of children placed in residential care and the higher numbers placed in independent fostering agency placements.
- Buckinghamshire county council's in-house fostering placements cost £393 per child per week. This is the same figure as the benchmark average although Buckinghamshire's unit costs are the eighth cheapest.

- Independent sector fostering placements are much more expensive, on average, at £740 per child per week.
- Buckinghamshire has been successful in negotiating "cost and volume" contracts with the independent sector which means independent fostering agency placements are bought more cheaply by the authority compared with similar councils where the average is £850 per week. Buckinghamshire has the cheapest unit cost of independent fostering agency placements of all nine benchmark authorities. (CIPFA benchmarking report 2013).
- Allowances paid to foster carers are above the national minimum allowance set by government. Compared to neighbouring local authorities, Buckinghamshire has been competitive up until recently, although the absence of specialist fee attracting schemes and the absence of an annual inflationary uplift to fees in recent times may have made the authority much less competitive than in the past.
- However, most local authorities do not pay foster carers the same amount of money paid by private fostering agencies to foster carers. Our unique selling point tends to be a public service ethos, good support, and excellent training.

Key issues and action already taken:

- The key issues in relation to fostering are:
 - How do we dramatically increase numbers of people in Buckinghamshire, who are prepared to provide care to looked after children?
 - How do we increase interest in fostering in Buckinghamshire?
 - How do we encourage younger people to foster so the service is sustainable in the longer term?
 - How do we improve the conversion rate of those who express an interest into approved foster carers?
- Action being taken includes:
 - Undertaking a full business process review to improve our efficiency, effectiveness, and customer orientation at enquiries stage and beyond to improve our conversion rates
 - Carrying out a year-long recruitment campaign, focusing on fostering fortnight as the highlight, but targeting particular markets to improve recruitment in key areas of need- under-fives and 15+.
 - Strengthening our performance management and user feedback to improve the use of data and information to strengthen our recruitment and retention of carers.
 - Establishing trading accounts for the in-house service to develop a much stronger cost and business focus.
 - Examining the feasibility of developing specialist fostering schemes-for example, parents and baby placements, remand fostering, adolescent fostering scheme.

Further action for consideration

The numbers of children being cared for in Buckinghamshire has been declining for a number of years now. This is having a significant impact on not only the budget but outcomes for children and young people who often are remaining in care much longer than is necessary because of the impact that the displacement from their communities is having on our ability to successfully return them home.

Arguably, continuing to do more of the same is likely to yield similar results in the future. More radical options may need to be considered to reverse this trend. This might include:

- A significant investment in local capacity and resources to bring about a bigger and more focused emphasis on the development of local Foster care capacity ("invest to save").
- Looking at other models of delivery to see what alternative options might be more effective in recruiting local carers.
- Significantly increasing allowances in payments to carers to create an incentive to care in Buckinghamshire.
- Investing in specialist fostering schemes as referred to above.

Steve Tanner

March 16, 2014

Appendix A

What is fostering?

Fostering is a way of providing a family life for children who cannot live with their own parents.

It is often used to provide temporary care while parents get help sorting out problems or to help children or young people through a difficult period in their lives.

Often children will return home once the problems that caused them to come into foster care have been resolved and that it is clear that their parents are able to look after them safely.

Others may stay in long-term foster care, some may be adopted, and others will move on to live independently.

Are there different types of fostering?

Types of foster care include:

- **Emergency** - where children need somewhere safe to stay for a few nights.
- **Short-term** - where carers look after children for a few weeks or months, while plans are made for the child's future.
- **Short-breaks** - where disabled children or children with special needs or behavioural difficulties enjoy a short stay on a pre-planned, regular basis with a new family, and their parents or usual foster carers have a short break for themselves.
- **Remand fostering** - where young people in England or Wales are "remanded" by the court to the care of a specially trained foster carer.
- **Long-term and permanent** - not all children who cannot return to their own families want to be adopted, especially older children or those who continue to have regular contact with relatives. These children live with long-term foster carers until they reach adulthood and are ready to live independently
- **"Connected persons" or "kinship" fostering or "family and friends"**- where children who are looked after by a local authority are cared for by people they already know. This can be very beneficial for children, and is called "connected persons", or "kinship" fostering or "family and friends". If they are not looked after by the local authority, children can live with their aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters or grandparents without outside involvement.
- **Private fostering** - where the parents make an arrangement for the child to stay with someone else who is not a close relative and has no parental responsibilities, and the child stays with that person (the private foster carer) for more than 27 days. Although this is a private arrangement there are special rules about how the child is looked after. The local authority must be told about the arrangements and visit to check on the child's welfare.

Is fostering a job?

All foster carers are registered with and contracted to a local authority or independent fostering provider. Increasingly foster carers are seen as professionals and receive a fee on a basis of being self-employed.

What do foster carers do?

The foster carer's role is to provide high quality care for the child. All children in foster care will be looked after by Buckinghamshire county council and the foster carers will work in partnership with the local authority to provide this.

The foster carers may also work with other professionals such as therapists, teachers or doctors to help the child to deal with emotional traumas or physical or learning disabilities.

What kind of people become foster carers?

Fostering service providers, including local authorities, need a wide range of people to meet children and young people's very different needs.

Wherever possible foster carers are sought who reflect and understand the child's heritage, ethnic origin, culture and language, and fostering agencies need carers from all types of backgrounds.

People do not need to be married to become a foster family - they can also be single, divorced or cohabiting. Gay men and lesbians can become foster carers.

There are no upper age limits for fostering, but fostering service providers expect people to be mature enough to work with the complex needs that children needing fostering are likely to have, and should have a good support network and be in general good health.

How are foster carers recruited?

Fostering service providers, including Buckinghamshire County Council, often recruit new carers through publicity campaigns or newspaper or radio advertisements. There may also be stands in public places such as local supermarkets, roundabouts, etc.

What preparation and training do foster carers get?

People who want to become foster carers need to go through thorough preparation and assessment.

- They attend groups where they learn about the needs of children coming into foster care.
- Alongside this, they receive visits from a social worker.

- The social worker will then prepare a report that is presented to an independent fostering panel, which recommends whether this person/family can become foster carers.
- Training does not stop when a person becomes a foster carer. All carers have an annual review and any training that's needed to ensure they are suitable to continue fostering.
- Training is linked to the training and development standards for foster carers set out by the Training Support Development Standards (TSDS) which have to be met by the end of first year of fostering. There are slightly different expectations for family and friends carers and short break carers.
- Foster carers are supported to continue to attend training following approval.

Are foster carers paid?

Allowances

- All foster carers receive an allowance to cover the cost of caring for a child in their home.
- For foster carers working on behalf of an agency, this is set by the individual fostering agency such as the local authority, and is usually dependent on the age of the looked after child.
- The government has now introduced a national minimum allowances for Foster carers

Fees

- Increasingly, fostering is being seen as a "professional" role. Any local authorities and independent fostering agencies run schemes which pay foster carers a fee. This may be linked to the child's particular needs but is often a reflection of the skills, abilities, length of experience or professional expertise the foster carer has.

Tax relief

- The introduction of tax relief in 2003 means that foster carers in the UK do not pay tax on their income from fostering, up to a maximum of £10,000 plus allowances..

National Insurance contributions

- Since April 2003, foster carers have also been entitled to Home Responsibility Protection - a way to make sure that they do not get less Basic Retirement Pension just because you have stayed at home to look after a child.

