

Buckinghamshire County Council

Fostering Service

Annual report

April 2018-19

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*Together... Keeping
Children Safe*



Introduction

In April 2018 we launched an ambitious recruitment and retention strategy with the aim of growing and developing our 'in-house' fostering service over 3 years to increase the number of children placed with our carers within the County. At the end of our first year of this strategy we have made significant progress with increased applications and an improved offer to carers working for the local authority.

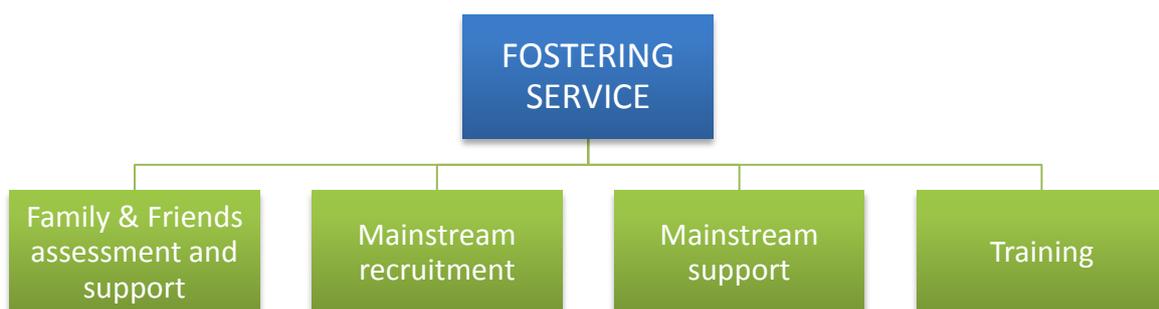
Over the year we have seen a large increase in the number of children in care and although we have been able to increase the number of children placed with Buckinghamshire County Council carers this has put significant pressure on the fostering service.

Overview of the fostering service

The fostering service is made up of 4 teams who support all Buckinghamshire County Council placements:

1. **Mainstream Fostering Recruitment team:** This team is responsible for the identification and assessment of those wishing to foster children with whom they do not have a pre-existing relationship with (mainstream fostering).
2. **Mainstream fostering support:** Following registration as a mainstream foster carer, each household is assigned a supporting social worker who is responsible for working with that carer and supporting them to care for the children placed with them
3. **Family & friends (Connected persons) assessment and support:** When a child comes into care, wherever possible we will place them with someone they already know. This team is responsible for assessing if proposed individuals are suitable and then providing support to these carers.
4. **Training:** This team is responsible for organising and delivering an extensive programme of training to support both mainstream and family & friend carers.

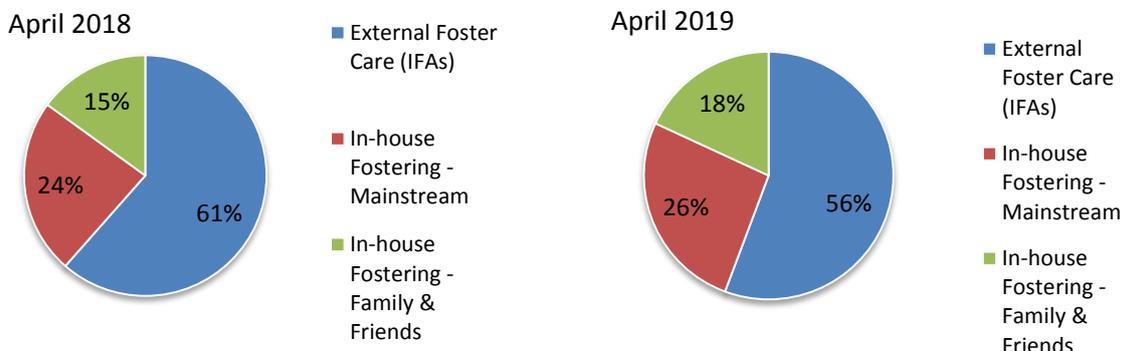
All placements made with independent fostering agencies (IFAs) are managed and supported by the children's services commissioning team.



Our children who are looked after

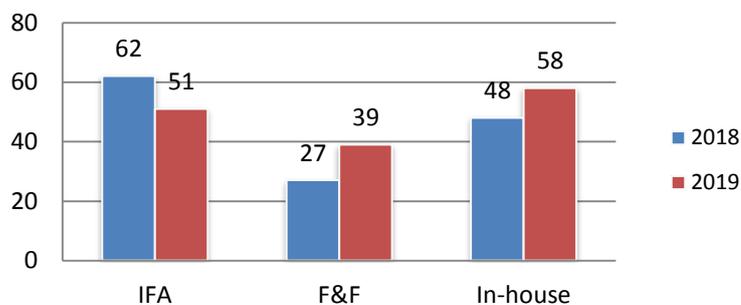
The number of children who are in the care of Buckinghamshire County Council has continued to rise over the past year. As at 1st April 2019 there were a total of 512 children in care of which 90 were within in-house mainstream care and 62 were placed with family or friends. In addition there are also 190 children with independent carers.

Since April 2018 we have focused on growing our in-house fostering services, both mainstream and family and friends. This helps us to keep more young people in county. We have significantly reduced the number of IFA placements over the last year meaning that we now have 31 more in-house placements than we did in April 2018.



Our priority this year has been on ensuring that, wherever possible, children under the age of 10 are placed with in-house or family and friends carers rather than with a private provider. This has been successful and we have seen a significant reduction in the number of young children placed with IFAs.

Placements of children under 10



Recruitment of mainstream foster carers

Our target for 1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019 was to grow our in-house service by 20% (15 new placements). We have implemented this through a robust recruitment and retention plan which has focused on the benefits of ‘Fostering with Bucks’ rather than through an independent fostering agency (IFA). This strategy identified 7 key areas which we believe are central to the appeal of working for this local authority:

1. **PLACEMENTS:** you will have a greater opportunity of having children placed with you, as we will approach in-house carers as soon as a placement is required. Our carers have access to all placement requests.
2. **RESPITE:** you will be offered respite care arrangements to allow you to have a short break during placements.
3. **OUTCOMES:** you will be close to ‘the team around the child’ enabling more effective care.
4. **ALLOWANCES:** you will be entitled to competitive fees, extra allowances including mileage, clothing allowances, set up fees etc.
5. **CARERS:** you will have the opportunity to join a close, well supervised carer network with regular groups, socials and meetings.
6. **TRAINING & THERAPEUTIC SUPPORT:** you will have the opportunity to access regular and comprehensive training and support from psychologists.

Progress has been monitored throughout the year by our recruitment and retention board which meets every 6 weeks and is made up of carers, social work staff with the fostering team, communications staff and the fostering managers.

We in fact managed to exceed our targets with 15 households approved by the Fostering Panel during that time, generating 19 new available placements. (This does not include households who were approved to offer respite only, i.e. one further household).

Enquiries received:

Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
19	23	13	7	11	6	17	18	9	26	15	16

Total: 180

The only pattern from previous years is a definite peak in January, which happened again this year. There is no other monthly pattern to enquiries. Fostering Fortnight is a national campaign led by Fostering Network, and occurs in May (and accounts for the other peak in the last year).

Fostering Information Evenings:

Attendees at Fostering Information Evenings (number of households in brackets)

May (4 events)	June	Aug	Oct	Nov	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
20 (17)	7 (5)	4 (2)	9 (6)	14 (10)	5 (5)	5 (5)	9 (5)	10 (9)

Mainstream fostering

Our focus this year has been on ensuring that we are making best use of the placements available and supporting our carers to take placements wherever possible. As a result of this we have seen a significant increase in the number of children we have been able to place in house. This is a real success story and has helped us to begin to tackle the challenges of dependence on the private sector and the need to place children a long way from home.

The impact of the increase in in-house placements has been that we have been able to reinvest some of the budget which is not being spent on independent placements (which are significantly more costly to the authority) into our carers. In doing this we have fully reviewed our payments structure and introduced a new offer which allows us to be competitive with IFA payments. We have received positive feedback from carers and feel that this is an important step forward in ensuring that our carers feel valued and rewarded for the work they do for us.

To celebrate the achievements of our carers over the year we held our annual awards ceremony in July. Carers were nominated for categories of:

- Foster Carer of the Year
- Best Newcomer
- Emergency Placements

As well as long service awards and one to recognise the work done by the Children's Social



Workers to support placements. This was a chance for us to say thank you to the carers who do so much to care for the young people cared for by Buckinghamshire County Council.

As a result of the increased number of placements made in-house we have seen a significant increase in the workload of our supervising social workers who support carers. Good support is essential to making sure that we can retain as well as recruit carers. To address this we have put in place a new post of Duty Officer who is responsible for working with our placement commissioning team to identify and make placements with our in-house foster carers. This has been a real benefit to the team and allows our social workers to focus on their role in supervising carers and supporting placements.

Specialist placements

As well as mainstream carers we also have a number of carers who provide more specialist placements. Our two contract carers, for example, provide sessions to disabled young people who are not currently in care to help parents to cope with the pressures of caring for a disabled child. This helps to prevent family breakdowns and ensure that these children are not brought into care. This preventative work is a key part of supporting families on the edge of care.

Family and Friend (Connected persons) carers

Family and friend placements are always our first consideration when a young person is brought into care. Wherever possible we aim to keep the child with someone they are already familiar with. Assessment of an individual as a family & friend carer may also be ordered by the court as part of the legal proceedings bringing the child into care.

We have seen a significant increase in the number of assessments undertaken over the past year which has been largely driven by court orders. During the 12 month period a total of 319 Initial Viability Assessments have been undertaken, these are initial assessments carried out when a friend or family is proposed to assess if a placement can be made and decide which person put forward is most suitable. This has resulted in a significant increase in placements (rising from 52 to 63) meaning fewer of our children are placed away from their existing networks, however the pressure on the teams completing the viability assessments has also increased leaving less time for working with families to achieve permanence.

In the past year we have aimed to bring support for family and friends in line with mainstream placements. As a result we have started providing access to our 'skills to foster' course to these carers and have included them in the review of payments. This helps us ensure that these carers are supported to provide stable placements.

This team is also responsible for supporting the granting of special guardianship orders. This allows a young person to achieve permanence, long term clarity about their future care. This year 23 SGO were granted, of which 21 were public law and 2 private law arrangements. This is a central part of our ambition to provide long term security for all our young people.

Over 18 year olds

Staying put

The Children and Families Act 2014 introduced a duty on the local authority to provide 'staying put' arrangements for fostered young people to continue to live with their former Foster Carer beyond their 18th birthday and potentially up to the age of 21 years if they are in education. This is a welcome development for young people who have not developed the maturity to move into independent living.

As at 1st April 2019 we had 11 young people in staying put arrangements. Although this is something we fully support and wish to extend it does create a pressure as a staying put arrangement in a foster home reduces the carer's capacity to take new placements.

Supported lodgings

We have currently one young person within a supported lodgings placement. This is a new development and something we are looking to continue to expand moving forward to ensure that young people have access to appropriate support once they are over 18. This alternative to young people remaining with Carers helps young people to live more independently.

Independent Providers

Where we do not have an available in-house carer we will place a child with an independent fostering agency. Although the day to day support of these carers will be carried out by the agency that they work for, they are monitored through our commissioning team who are responsible for ensuring that carers are able to meet the needs of the child. Many of these carers are able to provide specialist placements for children with more complex needs.

Over the last year we have worked closely with our providers to develop a closer working relationship which allows them to develop a longer term plan to meet our needs. For example, we have focused on placing younger children with in-house carers and as a result our providers have been able to prioritise recruiting carers for teenagers who we are less likely to be able to find carers for.

Training & support

One area which we identified in 2018 as a strong part of our offer was the training available to our carers. Our priority this year has been to build on this and to grow and extend our training offer. This has included offering spare places on our courses to independent providers and increasing the number of courses we offer.

Over the year we have run a total of 115 face to face courses covering 55 different topics ranging from our skills to foster introduction to being a foster carer to behaviour models, such as the great behaviour breakthrough. This equates to a total of 869 places taken up.

A key part of the retention strategy for carers is to ensure that our carers feel supported. Carers are given a number of opportunities to meet and to share their views. We run two support groups, one in the South and one in the North of the county where carers can meet informally to discuss any concerns or share experiences. Carers are able to share any issues with the council through fostering forums which take place quarterly. This year we have also implemented a recruitment and retention

board which carers are encouraged to attend to ensure that their views are represented throughout our improvement journey.

Another area where we have made significant progress is working with our partners at the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Since November we have been able to make available to our carers appointments to discuss concerns, either personal or related to children in placement, with a CAMHS clinical psychologist. CAMHS workers have also attended support groups to hear concerns from our carers so help shape their offer.

We continue to run a sons and daughters group to help to support the children of our carers. In the past year we have run 8 events including a trip to Thorpe Park and meals out with an average of 8-10 young people taking part in each. The activities chosen are based on consultation with the group and we continually look for new opportunities to make sure this continues to meet the needs of these young people.

De-registration of foster carers

There have been 10 de-registrations of carers in the past year. Of these, 3 were as a result of the young person in care returning home, 5 were granted Special Guardianship Orders or Child Arrangement Orders and only 2 were due to concerns about the care provided by carers. All 10 de-registrations were approved by the fostering panel responsible for overseeing carer approvals.

Our plans for the next year

Over the next year we will continue to implement our recruitment and retention strategy with the aim of growing our in-house service by an additional 20%. Our target for 2019/20 is 20 new placements. We are currently on track to be more than half way to that target by the end of July with 11 households currently undergoing assessment. Although this is a significant improvement and we are really proud of the progress made this year this will continue to put pressure on the service through increased workloads. It is a priority for us to ensure that this does not impact on retention.

We are also focused on continuing to develop our training offer. Specifically we are looking at implementing a single training approach to improve consistency of training across our wider service. We are also looking to increase our counselling offer through increasing access to our CAMHS team.

As well as extending mainstream placements we will focus on developing more specialist placements and extending our 18+ provision including extending our supported lodgings policy. Currently we remain dependent on external providers for the majority of these placements.

We are currently developing a number of improvements to our processes and communications including developing a mobile application to allow carers to submit expense claims digitally and providing an intranet of information for carers to replace the fostering handbook. This will help us to ensure that carers have all key information needed.