

## **RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

### **CABINET**

**31<sup>ST</sup> JULY 2014**

#### **REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY & CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

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#### **REGIONAL FOSTER CARER RECRUITMENT**

##### **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

To inform Cabinet of the South East Wales Improvement Collaborative (SEWIC) project to develop foster care recruitment across the Region and to seek agreement to enter into the regional marketing initiative.

##### **2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 note the contents of this report
- 2.2 agree, in principle, to the establishment of the Regional Foster Care Marketing Centre with other SEWIC Local Authorities, pending the production of a detailed business case to allow further consideration of the proposal by October 2014.

##### **3. BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The SEWIC Board was created by Directors of Social Services to provide co-ordination of the development of opportunities for regional commissioning and service development. Rhondda Cynon Taf's partners in SEWIC are Bridgend, Cardiff, Newport, Torfaen, Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Vale of Glamorgan, Merthyr Tydfil and Monmouthshire.
- 3.2 Across the SEWIC Region there is significant investment in foster care for Looked After Children. On 31st March 2013 the 10 local authorities that comprise SEWIC were responsible for a total of 3,015 Looked after Children. The aggregate spending on Looked After Children was in excess of £80million. Purchasing of fostering services from the independent sector alone comprised over £29 million of this spending.

- 3.3 There is a national shortage of foster carers which presents an ongoing problem for local authorities across the UK. The profile across the SEWIC Region shows that the foster carer population is an ageing one. Research undertaken by Fostering Network indicates that the average age of a carer in Wales is 55. The number of carers being de-registered across the Region has risen from 100 in 2011/12 to 120 in 2012/13. It is realistic to expect that Local Authorities will need to recruit more carers just to stand still.
- 3.4 Rhondda Cynon Taf, like all Local Authorities across the Region, has invested considerably to increase the number of foster carers through changes in remuneration, marketing and recruitment. There have been some successes. However, on all the key indicators used to consider the prospects for increasing significantly the number of in-house carers likely to be recruited using current approaches, the outlook is not good. This is despite some very positive practice developments in local authorities.
- 3.5 Against this background, the SEWIC Board commissioned work, in January 2012, to establish whether a business case existed for collaborative opportunities in the delivery of in-house fostering services. This was in recognition that most foster care placements are in-house local authority placements which are provided and managed at lower cost than those in the independent sector. Demand for in-house placements outstrips the number of placements available.
- 3.6 A report was presented to the SEWIC Board in May 2012. It demonstrated that the Local Authorities supported, reviewed and trained their foster carers to a good standard and that foster carers, once approved, were remaining as carers with them. Marketing and recruitment were, however, presenting far greater challenges; with particular difficulties in finding carers for adolescent children and sibling groups. A business case was made for exploring how marketing and recruiting foster carers could be delivered on a collaborative basis.
- 3.7 In January 2013 the SEWIC Board on receipt of a further update agreed the following proposals to support a co-ordinated regional approach to foster care recruitment:
- Each Local Authority would continue to recruit its own foster carers using the “Best Practice” model that had been developed.

The best practice model contains 11 practice standards covering every stage of the marketing and recruitment process. Essentially it has a very strong customer focus that filters through every standard. Each Local Authority has an implementation plan for the best practice model which is being monitored.

- Consideration be given to the development of other initiatives that would support the development of fostering services in the SEWIC Local Authorities; the most significant of which was the development of harmonised terms, conditions and payments to foster carers in order to successfully compete against the independent sector.

Further work needs to be undertaken to test out the proposed payment structure. Final recommendations for an amended structure will be presented to the SEWIC Board later in 2014.

- A Regional Marketing Centre for fostering services would be explored. The intention being that the Centre would provide a single point of entry for anyone interested in fostering across the Region and manage a regional Marketing Strategy with regional and local elements.

#### **4. THE REGIONAL MARKETING CENTRE**

- 4.1 In the report presented to the SEWIC Board in January 2013, the professional case for creating a Regional Marketing Centre was established. It was recognised that although considerable efforts were being made by Local Authorities to increase the numbers of enquiries, these were not sufficient to make any real difference to the numbers of mainstream foster carers being approved. The SEWIC Board requested further work to be done on the financial and business considerations before a final decision.
- 4.2 Marketing Officers from Bridgend, Caerphilly, Newport and Rhondda Cynon Taf have worked together to develop a regional marketing strategy. All of them have been working on marketing strategies within their own authorities and they have expertise in both fostering and marketing, making them well placed to provide specialist advice on the best way forward.
- 4.3 The SEWIC Board was provided with a proposal for the Regional Marketing Centre and Strategy in January 2014. The proposal would provide each Local Authority with greater marketing activity than they have currently and would include some elements which would be delivered on a regional basis e.g. one brand/logo/image, one website, same promotional materials and other more local initiatives building on local activity that has worked. It would establish a coordinated and streamlined marketing presence, much stronger than the current disjointed working across the Region. Additionally, Local Authorities would stop having to compete against each other in generating interest from prospective foster carers and instead focus on competing with the Independent Sector. It would also provide a single point of entry and a strong customer focus - all research indicates that the response received at the initial enquiry point is critical in determining whether the applicant stays with that Local Authority or goes elsewhere.

- 4.4 The overall trend for enquiries is declining and there is still a significant gap between numbers of enquiries generated and those converted to assessments; significant time is spent following up enquiries for people who it becomes apparent are either not suitable or not genuinely interested. Whilst generally increasing numbers of foster carers has been of great value we now need to more effectively target carers to look after more challenging children and young people and sibling groups.
- 4.5 It is recognised that there is a need to target marketing in a more sophisticated way going forward. The Regional Marketing Centre would provide a competitive edge that local authorities currently cannot achieve. Some examples are as follows:
- ability to create, manage and update regularly a, more attractive and interactive website. Applicants consistently report that information on local authority websites is difficult to find as it is often 'buried deep';
  - be in a far better position to maximise the opportunities to 'pay per click' on Google advertising. This would place local authorities in a far better competitive position with Independent Foster Agencies as generally applicants click on one of the first few results after Googling. Currently, these are adverts paid for by the Independent Foster Agencies;
  - have a presence at regional and national events – such as the Eisteddfod, the Royal Welsh Show, and the Mardi Gras; and
  - be able to draw on a pool of over a thousand in-house carers to support marketing opportunities.
- 4.6 The report presented to the SEWIC Board in January 2014 estimated that full year staffing and marketing costs for a Regional Marketing Centre would be approximately £322,000 per year. There would be one-off set up costs of £11,700. The estimated ongoing revenue costs to Rhondda Cynon Taf would lie between £33,200 and £78,937 per annum depending on the funding formula used. It is anticipated that the reduction in numbers and costs of foster placements procured from the independent sector will make the Regional Marketing Centre cost neutral and deliverable from within existing budgets.
- 4.7 Further work has been commissioned by the SEWIC Board to develop the detailed business case to include a service specification, staffing, governance arrangements and funding.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

- 5.1 There is a shortage of foster carers, an ageing population of existing carers and the need to recruit more foster carers to maintain and expand the level of availability. Local authorities are currently competing against each other as well as the independent sector to recruit those that may be interested in

fostering. Initiatives that reduce the competition amongst Local Authorities and increase their collective power in the market place hold the greatest prospect of success in recruiting foster carers and in reducing overall expenditure on placements.

- 5.2 Although Rhondda Cynon Taf has had some success in attracting foster carers over recent years sustaining this will be extremely challenging in the current climate and there is always an impact when neighbouring Local Authorities undertake some marketing or recruitment activity. There would be a significant risk to the longer term viability of Rhondda Cynon Taf's fostering service if the SEWIC initiatives proceed without our involvement.

