



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

23rd SEPTEMBER 2019

REGIONAL FOSTERING SERVICE UPDATE

REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY & CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN DISCUSSIONS WITH THE RELEVANT PORTFOLIO HOLDER COUNCILLOR C LEYSHON

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide an update to Corporate Parenting Board about the recruitment and retention of foster carers, with a particular focus on the regional front door for fostering recruitment and the changes to operational delivery within fostering recruitment.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Board note for information the changes to fostering recruitment and the performance information provided.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The challenges facing local authorities recruiting and retaining foster carers has been documented through the work of the National Fostering Framework as reported in phase 1, 2 and 3 reports. This report will provide members with an update regarding the Cwm Taf Regional Fostering Service and the progress of implementation of the National Fostering Framework across RCT.

- 3.2 The impact of RCTCBC not recruiting and retaining enough local authority mainstream foster carers is important to note. These include a lack of suitable placements for children who may have a range of complex needs to be met. The reduced availability of placement choice provides challenges for RCTCBC in trying to ensure we can match effectively and support placement stability. The impact of not retaining foster carers also poses challenges for RCTCBC, notably the loss of experienced skilled foster carers who the service have invested in

supporting over many years. There are a number of reasons foster carers discontinue their role, including retirement, ill health or through carers making the decision to move to independent fostering agencies.. There is a significant financial impact for the council in terms of having to use independent foster agencies (IFA's) whose costs per placement are significantly higher than in-house provision. A further impact when using IFA's can be the risk of instability for the child, who may have to move out of their local area, change schools, friendship groups and support networks.

4. REGIONAL RECRUITMENT COLLABORATION

- 3.3 The work of the National Fostering Framework (NFF) has informed RCTCBC's decision to enhance the fostering recruitment service and ensure a robust, responsive service is provided to members of the public enquiring about becoming a foster carer for RCT. To address this identified need we have developed a new process from initial enquiry right through to assessment which has been in place since April 2019.. The fostering recruitment service has been developed through a regional collaboration with MTCBC and is known as the regional front door for fostering service.
- 3.4 The regional front door work is a collaborative project between RCTCBC and MTCBC, with RCT acting as the host authority for the regional customer care centre. The project also includes three full time staff with specific responsibilities for aspects of the marketing, recruitment and customer care responsibilities. This team consists of a Regional Marketing Officer, who is responsible for creating an innovative and diverse marketing strategy for each local authority, producing web based content and developing social media output as well as the organisation of promotional events and finding new ways of engaging those who are interested in becoming a foster carer for RCTCBC. In addition, a Regional Recruitment Officer is responsible for following up initial enquiries in a responsive and positive manner and undertaking initial visits to those who have expressed an interest in becoming a foster carer.

When analysing the approach to recruiting foster carers it has been noted that a robust customer care approach has been proven to be successful whether used in local authorities or the private sector (IFA's) The programme is managed by the Regional Development Manager for Fostering Services, who is employed to implement the work programme of the NFF, regional development group and report progress back to the National Strategic Steering Group.

5. PROGRESS TO DATE

- 5.1 Since launching in April 2019, the regional front door for fostering recruitment has become the established contact point for those wishing to enquire about becoming foster carers. A dedicated recruitment telephone line has been established, in addition to a new regional fostering website and live web-chat function, in order to provide potential applicants with numerous points of contact to find out information and enquire about fostering for RCTCBC or MTCBC.
- 5.2 Information gathered from the Quarter 1 performance report shows that the conversion rate from Initial Enquiry to the pre assessment Initial Visit screening has increased from 11.5% to 25.7% compared to the figures from Q1 2018. This has been supported by a dedicated recruitment officer offering a consistent approach throughout the process and being able to progress to Initial Visit phase at a faster rate than previously. Through implemented clear timescales for each part of the process we have seen an improvement in conversion rates which is evidencing the benefit of having a localised responsive service.
- 5.3 The conversion rate from initial enquiry to proceeding into full assessment has increased from 5.8% to 11.4% compared to the figures from Q1 2018. This has been supported by tighter processes during the handover to Assessment teams, KPI's of allocating assessments within 10 working days of a positive IV and a strong relationship between the Cwm Taf recruitment team and the Assessment teams within each LA.
- 5.4 Response times from initial enquiry to both follow up recruitment call and initial visit have improved significantly than during the same Quarter last year. The decision to introduce a recruitment officer visit prior to a social worker visit has improved the timeliness of response times. The recruitment officer is able to give general information about fostering for RCT at an early stage to inform potential applicants of the process and have focus on the general offer available for foster carers e.g. support, leisure passes and financial allowances.
- 5.5 To further assist the improvement to retention of foster carers RCT have also implemented the Fostering Wellbeing Programme which has developed the role of Pioneer foster carers who are able to offer peer support and advice to approved foster carers and assist with the skills to foster training for prospective foster carers. The principles of the Fostering Wellbeing programme have been implemented within our foster carer training programme and we will continue to implement the principles of the Fostering Wellbeing Programme across the fostering service to support foster carers in their role caring for RCTCBC children and young people.

6. NEXT STEPS

- 6.1 In addition to the work that has been developed around the recruitment of foster carers, we are also currently developing our core offer for Local Authority foster carers. This will include:
 - Promoting the benefits of fostering for your local authority
 - Developing RCTCBC as a fostering friendly organisation.
- 6.2 Through our recruitment and retention strategy we will be promoting the benefits of fostering for the local authority and it is hoped we will begin to see an increase in enquiries and applications to become mainstream foster carers as well as retaining our existing pool of approved foster carers. In turn this will provide placement stability for Children Looked After within RCT.

7. NATIONAL FOSTERING FRAMEWORK WORK PLAN

- 7.1 Other strands of the NFF work programme that are also being developed are the implementation of the national training framework for foster carers, to raise knowledge and help support the development of carers as co-professionals and support them to deal with some of the challenges they face in supporting our young people.
- 7.2 A further strand of the NFF work programme is to consider the harmonisation of fees and allowances paid to foster carers. The potential of harmonising foster carer fees and allowances for carers across RCTCBC and MTCBC is currently being scoped out to enable consistency when delivering a regional marketing and recruitment service. In addition the embedding of the national performance framework is vitally important to our reporting mechanisms and performance management as mentioned in 3.6.
- 7.3 The implications of progressing the National Fostering Framework programme of work for Children and Young People looked after by Rhondda-Cynon Taf CBC will be that where they cannot remain with family members, they will have greater opportunity to remain in their local communities. Developing a wider pool of foster carers in-house will provide greater placement choice and enable improved matching of young people to the best possible homes. The outcomes for children and young people will be improved placement stability and support for their long term future.

8. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

An Equality and Diversity Assessment is not required as part of this information report.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

There are no financial implications.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

A Memorandum of Understanding between the two Local Authorities has been developed alongside representatives from Children's Services and Legal and Democratic Services to ensure the long term sustainability of the project. This has been signed off by Service Directors in each LA.

11. LINKS TO THE COUNCILS CORPORATE PLAN / OTHER CORPORATE PRIORITIES/ FUTURE GENERATIONS – SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.

The regional front door for fostering recruitment and the NFF compliment the Council's corporate priorities to promote independence and positive lives for everyone by ensuring Rhondda Cynon Taf's children and young people will receive a great start in life.

12. CONCLUSION

The development of the Regional Front Door for Fostering Recruitment will continue to provide a consistent, robust, responsive and professional service to those people who are interested in becoming foster carers for Rhondda Cynon Taf. The ongoing work of the National Fostering Framework and the implementation of the regional work programme will support the aim of recruiting and retaining more foster carers, providing greater consistency across fostering services and helping Rhondda Cynon Taf's children and young people to have the best start in life.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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