

Thurrock Fostering Recruitment Strategy

April 2012-March 2015

Introduction

This report will look at the past marketing activity of the fostering service, outline the current situation and needs and put forward recommendations for the financial years 2012/2013, 2013/14 and 2014/15.

Future activities such as media publicity, advertising, events and online progression will be discussed and an action points included for taking these ideas forward over the next year and subsequent years with addendums to be added each financial year.

Thurrock

There are considerable development pressures within the Borough; the Draft East of England Plan proposes that 18,500 new homes and 26,000 new jobs should be created by 2021. The Office of National Statistics has predicted that by 2018 an extra 23,000 people will arrive in Thurrock, equating to a 14.9% increase over a 10 year period. This will have implications on the number of children coming into care, but will also increase the pool from which to recruit foster carers.

Thurrock is a place of contrasts with a long history of change and adaptation, owing much of its prosperity to its 29km (18 miles) of riverfront. It covers 165sq km (64sq miles) and is an increasingly diverse borough as particular concentrations of ethnic minority groups settle in the borough to take advantage of its relatively affordable housing and proximity to London.

It has a population of over 157,000 people, of which some 25,000 are of school age.

By 2031, the population of Thurrock is expected to be over 200,000. Significant changes in the ethnic and age mix of the residents of the Borough have been seen over the last few years with increasing settlement in the area, particularly from UK families of black African heritage (1st and 2nd Generation) and Eastern European workers. These new communities tend to feature younger adults aged 18-34, many with young families with the consequent demands for new housing, medical services and school places.

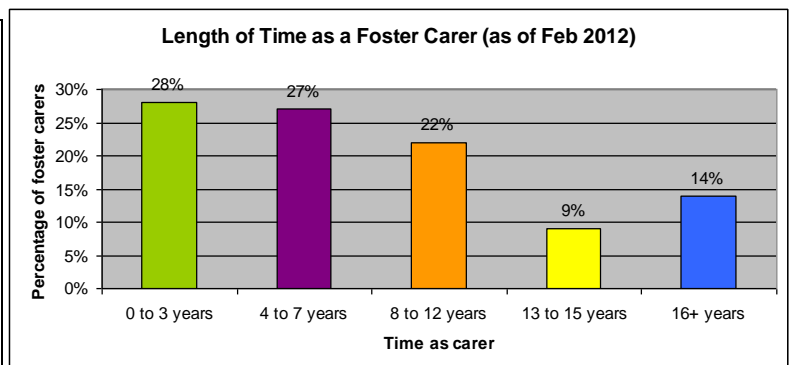
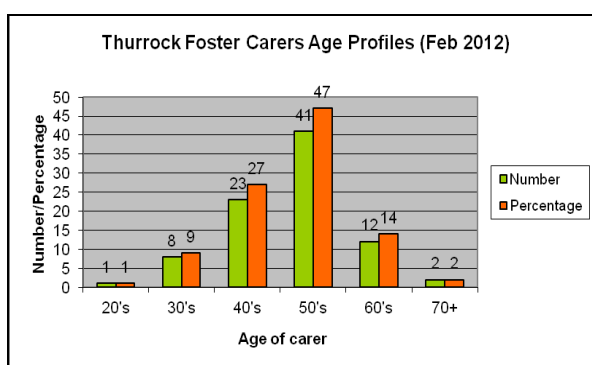
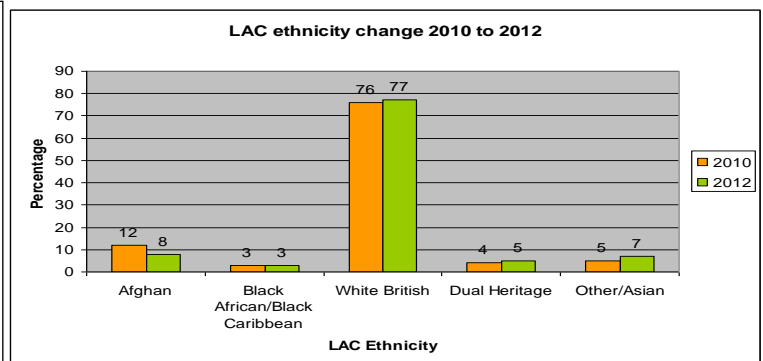
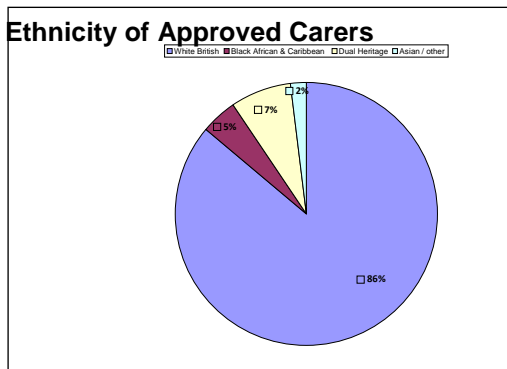
Thurrock is a mixture of the industrialised and semi-urban south with the north being a collection of scattered rural communities. Over half of Thurrock is green belt.

Objectives of this strategy

- To increase the ratio of enquiry to approval to 7% in 2012/13 and 8.5% in 2013/14 and 10% in 2014/15.
- Identify which types of foster carers are specifically needed and target advertisements and information to increase enquiries from people suited to the children for these groups of need
- Increase fostering awareness to BME communities.
- To ensure the provision of foster carers matches the needs and diversity of the children and young people in care and increase the stability of placements (This includes therapeutic and supported lodgings placements).

Profile of existing carers

There are currently 4 tiers of carers, Levels 1, 2, 3 and Therapeutic (Supported Lodgings Carers are all level 2 carers). 63% of Thurrock's carers are 50+; reflecting the national picture that foster carers are an aging population. Seventy-two percent of carers have been fostering for over 4 years with nearly half of all carers fostering for over 8 years.



The ethnicity profile shows that the significant majority of carers, 86%, are White British – this is 9% more than the White British Looked After Children (LAC) population for February 2012. Black

African or Black Caribbean carers represent 5%, with just 3% of the looked after children coming from these ethnicities. The biggest deficit still remains for Afghan young people but with no Afghan community in or around Thurrock, this does not look set to be relieved in the near future. However, the ethnicity profile of the LAC population has remained virtually static over the past 2 years with the biggest change being a 4% decrease in the Afghan young people.

Enquiry Activity

	09-10	10-11	11-12
No. of enquiries	253	240	196
No. of initial visit requests	122	89	84
Approvals	13	13	12
Ratio of enquiries to approval	5.13%	5.42%	6.12%

Year 11-12 lvs Ethnicity	Number of IVRs*
African	13
Caribbean	5
Asian	5
White British	43
Irish	1
South African	1
Portugese	1
Dual Heritage	1
Mauritian	1
Unknown	13
Total	84

Age profile of enquiries 11-12	
60s	3
50s	37
40s	55
30s	54
20s	16
no dob	31
Total	196

*IVR – Initial Visit Request

Although enquiry rates have dropped over the past few years, the key area to note is the ratio of enquiries to approvals as this has increased this year, 6.12% from the previous year, 5.42%.

This trend continues in the ratio between initial visit request to enquiry, showing us that even though enquiries may be down, proportionately more people are requesting an initial visit, with ratio of Initial visit request to enquiry being 37% in 2010/11 to 42% in 2011/12. Though, both of these are lower than 2009/10, where the ratio of Initial visit request to enquiry was 48%, however the overall ratio of enquiries to approval for that year was significantly lower at 5.13%.

Initial visit request have remained high comparatively to enquiries, with the highest being requested from White British (43 requests) and the highest proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) coming from African applicants with 13 initial visit enquiries from this group.

The majority of enquirers are in their 30's-40's (56%), which would indicate that the new marketing materials are reaching a younger audience, as previously the largest age group for enquiries was 40's-50's age range.

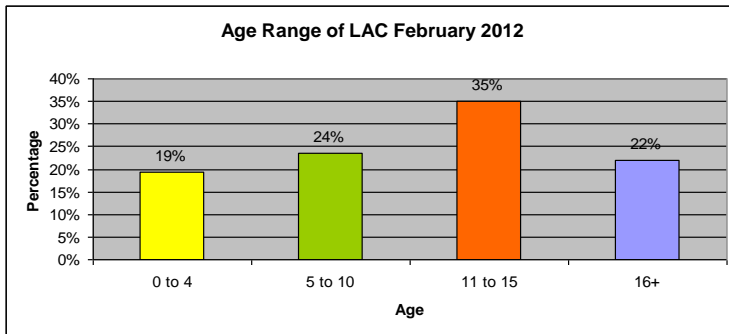
Fostering enquiries: % in each ward of Thurrock (Jan 10-Jan 12)

Aveley & Uplands	5.42%	Orsett	4.33%
Belhus	5.78%	South Chafford	7.22%
Chadwell St. Mary	6.86%	Stanford East & Corringham Town	2.53%
Chafford & North Stifford	7.58%	Stanford-Le-Hope West	2.17%
Corringham & Fobbing	1.44%	Stifford Clays	2.89%
East Tilbury	1.81%	The Homesteads	5.05%
Grays Riverside	6.86%	Tilbury Riverside & Thurrock Park	5.78%
Grays Thurrock	7.22%	Tilbury St. Chads	3.25%
Little Thurrock Blackshots	2.17%	West Thurrock & South Stifford	10.47%
Little Thurrock Rectory	3.61%		
Ockendon	7.58%		

The table above indicates that current advertising could be most improved in Corringham and Fobbing as well as the areas of East Tilbury and Stanford-Le-Hope because these areas have large housing stocks and are more populated. The largest of the BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) communities are in Purfleet, Tilbury and Chafford Hundred, so they will be targeted specifically for a BME campaigns.

Analysis of need

Over the last five years, the total number of children in care has increased from 205 in 2007-08 to 240 for 2011-12 (17% over five years). Looking at the age breakdown of children in care over the last five years, the largest age group was 10 to 15 years old which averaged 40% of all looked after children. The next highest group was 16 to 17 year olds with an average of 25% off all looked after children.



A breakdown on gender over the last five years shows that between 52% and 60% of looked after children are male; with 40% to 48% female.

Over the same period the number of children in residential care has increased from 10 to 23 with independent living showing a slight increase from 12 to 15 young people.

Placement failure is an issue with an average of 30 children / young people experiencing more than 3 moves over the last few years; with the resultant disruption and costs.

Total Children in Care						
Totals	Year	Boys	Girls	Totals	+/-	% Change
	2012	145	95	240	31	14.8%
	2011	115	94	209	-24	-10.3%
	2010	133	100	233	14	6.4%
	2009	123	96	219	14	6.8%
	2008	107	98	205	19	10.2%
	2007	88	98	186		

Marketing and Publicity

January 2010 saw the introduction of refreshed marketing and advertising materials. The previous campaign had been used for 3-4 years and it was felt that the campaign had become stale and people were becoming 'immune' to the images. The refresh included whole new branding in the information packs, press adverts, website and posters. The new marketing materials were typographical – allowing for a variety of slogans and colours to be used in a mix and match, keeping the materials fresh, current and responsive to the need of the looked after population.

The designs were aimed with a younger/ target market whilst not alienating older applicants. The information packs were an important component a quality product was needed that could easily be changed if copy needed to be amended and this is what was achieved. Feedback about the information packs has shown that people

have found them to be colourful and informative, so it is felt at present there is no plan to change design or content.

When looking at source of enquiry information it is important to remember that the target audience may have seen more than one piece of marketing but will often only cite one when prompted. In light of cost cuts across the council, it is even more important to make sure the advertising is effective but will continue to bring the enquiries in.

We will continue to monitor the number of website hits to see which are the peak periods and use this information to inform if the advertising is having an indirect impact on people sourcing information, even if they are not necessarily making an enquiry.

Traditional advertising (local press, posters and free magazines) will continue to be used as well as developing an online presence through Facebook, Twitter and Search Engine Optimisation.

Events

Events over the past 3 years have included having an information stand at local events including Orsett Show, T-Fest, Tilbury Fun Day as well as at libraries, and local supermarkets.

The recruitment team will continue to be available in the community to answer fostering questions and allow people the opportunity to make a face-to-face enquiry about fostering. One event per quarter will be advertised on the fostering website and Facebook – these will take place at libraries, local halls, open evenings and fun days and promotional items will be available for prospective carers.

Open evenings provide the greatest source of enquiries and these will continue 3-4 times a year. Promotional activity will be two weeks prior to the open evening. The format of the open evening has changed over the past year and the evenings are now more interactive and include a focus session where existing foster carers speak about their experiences and are available to answer any questions along with a 'quiz' which prompts people to really think about their own circumstances and how fostering would fit into their lives.

Foster care fortnight provides a platform from which to piggyback local recruitment with that carried out nationally by the Fostering Network. An open evening will provide the call to action that will form the basis of online and press advertising.

The profile of fostering will be raised throughout the borough via press releases and using existing foster carers to attract more carers (online video used on Facebook, You Tube and fostering website). By using existing carers it makes the role of fostering more 'real' and reminds potential applicants that all kinds of people can foster.

Monitoring

Thurrock Fostering have recognised there were gaps in the monitoring system, namely people were able to leave their address details on the answer phone, or email their address and a pack would be sent. It has been recognised that key pieces of information were not being captured at enquiry stage and therefore up-to-date statistics were not easily obtainable. In light of this, screening has been tightened and if people leave their contact number, or contact us via email, then a follow up call will be made to go through the questionnaire.

In addition the stage at which the application closes will be closely monitored as well as who is closing (applicant/Thurrock Fostering) in order to identify the households where the time is not quite right – and they can then be followed up in 6-12 months.

Prior to April 2012, a reminder card was sent to applicants who had requested an information pack but had not requested further information or an initial visit. Between April 2010 and March 2012 three people responded to the reminder cards that were sent. As of April 2012, reminder letters are now sent at the end of the following month to people who have requested an information pack but have not progressed to the next stage; for example, a request in May will receive the follow up letter at the end of June.

Information packs are usually sent out within one working day of the request (providing we have all the relevant information) and applicants are asked to contact the office if they have not received their pack within 7 working days. Within the past year, 97% of packs were sent within one working day and 3% were sent out within one week of the request. The aim for 2012/13 and subsequent 2 years is for 100% to be sent out within two working days.

Targeted Recruitment

The relationship between the recruitment and assessment team and fostering/duty team is key and there must be effective to ensure there is a more complete understanding, for both teams, of relevant information in relation to the throughput of new carers and a sharing of placement need information that will allow for a more informed and coordinated approach to targeting and prioritising recruitment activity.

In order to promote effective communication regular meetings are planned to enhance knowledge between teams and share information effectively.

Two of the largest groups Thurrock need to recruit for are teenage carers and carers for sibling groups and this is the same as the national picture. Past recruitment has specifically targeted carers for these children; open evenings highlight these areas of

need. Profiles of sibling groups have been made available at the open evenings after being advertised in the press.

Press advertising currently includes ads specifically quoting teenagers or sibling groups – this will continue.

Greater use of the website can be utilised over the coming year to increase awareness and we can use the 'Spotlight' facility to do this. Once Facebook is established discussions can be generated to get people thinking and talking about caring for teenagers and siblings.

We will explore the opportunity of having videos of previous looked after children as well as existing foster carers to try and dispel some of the myths/misconceptions people may have about caring for a teenager.

Recruitment of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Carers

In order to keep the fostering service representative of the Thurrock population, special emphasis needs to be placed on raising awareness to BME communities. Over the past year 27% of known enquiries have come from the BME community.

No. of BME pack requests	52
% of total number of pack requests	27
No. of BME initial visit requests	25
% of total number of initial visit requests	30
BME Approvals	2
Ratio BME Enquiry to approval	4%

BME Table: Data 2011/12

The advertising so far has been inclusive and it is felt that currently the enquiry level for BME carers is proportionate the number of BME looked after children, however, the website does actively encourage BME and dual heritage applicants to apply. The need will be assessed throughout the year and generic marketing tailored.

Fee comparison to other authorities

Fees and allowances have become a central issue in fostering over the past few years. Fostering in the private sector has rapidly developed with many new independent fostering agencies, IFAs, gaining a significant proportion of placements. The trend has been one of steady growth in the private sector set against a decline in local authority in-house placements at Thurrock. It is important to acknowledge the local competition for recruitment is high among both other neighbouring local authorities (LAs) and also IFAs. Another important acknowledgement contributing to the rise in external placements is the increase in the number of looked after children, which mirrors the national picture.

The table below of neighbouring local authorities highlights the 'salary' (allowance for child and fee payment) that Thurrock carers receive per week in comparison. Essentially this shows that Thurrock are not competitive at entry level or when placing multiple children into a fostering household as Essex have recently upped their payments in these areas. As Essex are Thurrock's closest recruitment neighbours, and possibly the biggest LA competitors, Thurrock Fostering need to be seen as offering a competitive package in order to not lose potential applicants even before enquiry.

The pay structure from local authorities is more complex than that of IFAs as the IFAs pay an amount per child with, perhaps, some variation depending on the complexity of need or skills of the carer; it is a relatively simple and straightforward system.

In order to address this issue, a growth bid for implementation in 2013-14 will be submitted during 2012-13 to address the lower end of the payment scale. Feedback from potential applicants has been that £53 per week for the foster carer's skills has been deemed too low and people have been concerned that even though they are not fostering for the money, it would be very difficult to live off £53 per week – especially for applicants that are thinking of giving up jobs in order to foster full time.

Essentially the growth bid will look to amalgamate the current Levels 1 and 2, so entry level would equate to £120 per week. This would bring payments in line with other neighbouring authorities.

Fee	Thurrock	Barking and Dagenham	Essex	Havering	Redbridge Lower Rate	Redbridge Upper Rate
Babies 0 to 1 years old (Scale A)	£131.47	£296.50	£131.53	£228.37	£142.81	£204.90
0 to 13						
Pre-Primary 2 to 4 years old (Scale A)	£131.47	£296.50	£131.53	£228.37	£142.81	£204.90
Primary 5 to 8	£149.76	£374.50	£149.80	£228.37	£162.80	£204.90
Primary 9 to 10	£149.76	£374.50	£149.80	£228.37	£162.80	£204.90
Primary 5 to 10 years old (Scale B)	£149.76	£374.50	£149.80	£228.37	£162.80	£204.90
Secondary 16 and 17 years old (Scale D)	£226.74	£454.50	£226.80	£321.00	£246.21	£315.10
Essex Intermediate Fee			£125.00			
Essex Advanced Fee			£250.00			
Plus NVQ				£25.00		
Plus Skill Level 1	£53.00					
Plus Skill Level 2	£106.00					
Therapeutic Skill Level 3 Inclusive	£262.65					
Therapeutic Skill Level 3 Plus Inclusive	£288.92					

Second or subsequent placement			£125.00			
Annual Bonus				£300.00		
Emergency Placement						

The new structure will go some way to redressing the balance compared to other Local Authorities' pay scales but will not offer new carers the same financial incentive as they can obtain from IFAs, thus it is critical that Thurrock ensures it is providing high quality support and other "non-financial" benefits in order to become an attractive proposition in a competitive market.

Through discussions with HR, a benefits package will be explored – similar to staff benefits, including discounts at local shops, library benefits, leisure discounts etc. The first stage of investigation will be during the 12/13 financial year.

Increased recruitment from IFAs - Eastern Region 5/6 (ER5 and ER6)

At the end of April 2007, a Business Case was presented to the Eastern Region Strategic Commissioning Forum from five Eastern Region Local Authorities (ER5 group) Hertfordshire, Suffolk, Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock asking to develop a sub-regional Preferred Provider Framework of Independent Fostering Providers. It was anticipated that the average weekly price paid for fostering care would be reduced by between 3 – 5% by undertaking a competitive tender.

A direct result of the ER5 group is an increase in recruitment activities from the 23 IFAs involved in the contract. One condition of the agreement was that each provider should recruit more carers in each of the ER5 areas. There has been a significant presence of adverts from many of the IFAs involved in the ER5 contract.

The renewed contract for ER5, which is now ER6 (including Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and excluding Southend) will bring improved outcomes for children when placed externally. This contract is a rolling select list and providers will move up/down the tiers, judged on their self assessment, price, capacity and recruitment; which will result in an even more competitive marketplace from which to recruit carers. Although this contract is due to start 1 April 2013, providers who are aware of the selection process and are already trying to recruit foster carers in the 6 local authority areas in order to increase their capacity. Many new IFA's are beginning to move into the Thurrock area as they wish to be part of this new contract; 40 providers expressed an interest in becoming a provider within Thurrock.

Foster Carer Retention

Seventy-two percent of Thurrock's carers have been fostering (for Thurrock) for over 4 years with 45% having fostered for in excess of 8 years. These high levels indicate that once recruited, carers are generally happy with the service they receive and by interviewing carers for video testimonials, it showed us that actually they like the fact Thurrock is a small organisation and they know the staff and the staff know them.

However, Thurrock Fostering cannot become complacent and in a competitive market place, the packages we offer foster carers needs to be reviewed periodically to ensure our carers are offered the best support, training and financial packages possible.

Oaktree

Oaktree resource centre provides a range of services to looked after children, their families and their carers, with a focus on encouraging the development of supportive relationships and improving emotional health and well-being. For foster carers it provides therapeutic support from a dedicated team of social workers and clearly defined links with the Child & Family Consultation Service.

Training

A comprehensive package of training is offered to foster carers within Thurrock. It has been described by the Head of Service as "The jewel in Thurrock's crown". This service is coordinated by the Training and Staff Development Officer who is part of the workforce planning team. Training is offered to candidates who have a successful initial visit in the form of Skills to Foster training. Once approved foster carers will be eligible to attend a comprehensive training programme including: Post Approval Training, Child Protection, Health and Safety, Healthy Eating, Speak-easy and NVQ Level 3 – Health & Social Care (Children and Young People). Foster carers work towards the standards set out in Childrens Workforce Development Council (CWDC).

Training is provided to:-

- Help foster carers become better at doing their job.
- Improve knowledge, develop and skills and assist the carer in promoting the physical, social and emotional development of children and young people.
- Establish an explicit, positive framework of values, which promotes equality of opportunity.
- Encourage foster carers to reflect and look at the effect of discrimination in all parts of the community, recognising that they care for children in the context

of a wider society, and that for many children discrimination is a fact of everyday life.

- Ensure that all foster carers are competent and confident in safe caring and protecting children from harm.
- Encourage foster carers to take responsibility for their own professional development through the creation of individual action plans

Magazine

Foster Carers will continue to receive a bi-annual magazine, Jigsaw, with articles, health information, training, staff news, updates, tips and advice. A copy is sent to all foster carers and their input welcomed and sought. A quarterly meeting for Jigsaw takes place and the committee includes foster carers.

The One Team

The One Team is the recently revived (June 2012) foster carers committee and had a very successful launch party. The carers have set up the committee to support Thurrock foster careers and their families. They will provide information learning opportunities, advice and organise social events for foster carers (and their families, including looked after children in their care). This support is continued through the buddy system where new foster carers are 'buddied' up with a more experienced carer providing advice and support.

Conclusion

To summarise, Thurrock Fostering have strong foundations on which to continue successful recruitment of foster carers. Monitoring has increased over the past year and target groups have been identified.

Research from the Fostering Network indicates that it takes potential foster carers up to three years (median) thinking time between seeing an advert or article and coming forward and the generic advertising must be continued in order to plant the seeds of thought and it is important to remember that even though advertising is continually taking place, the results of this may not be seen for months or years therefore cannot be discounted as 'unproductive'.

This is also the case for approvals – because of the length of time it takes, people applying in the latter half of the year will not show as an approval statistic until the following year.

In order to reach both wide and targeted audiences, it is important to use a multi-layered marketing approach and use traditional (newspapers, poster sites, events)

and new media (internet, Facebook, Twitter, search engine optimisation) as well as direct and indirect approaches.

With the noted increased recruitment efforts of neighbouring Local Authorities and the new ER6 contracts requiring more recruitment from IFAs the recruitment problem looks set to become even more competitive and challenging. If targets are to be met there will be a requirement for continued commitment across the service as well as additional investment by Thurrock Council.

However, in light of financial constraints, smarter working principles need to be implemented and achieved; this will include working with other departments within the council to achieve economies of savings via corporate communications whose new guidelines should give the fostering department a clearer route for advertising and reaching target markets.

Addendum – December 12/January 13: Update of Information

In addition to the information provided in this document, the following is an update.

Recruitment

Lakeside – in order to enhance local recruitment it is planned that in January 2013 the recruitment team will have a week's information stand at the local shopping centre. This has not been tried before and its purpose is to put recruitment at the heart of the community and to also promote fostering to a large footfall, whilst advertising for the March 2013 open evening. The success of this event will not only be the number of enquiries/initial visits but also the number of people attending the open evening.

Communications – a recent meeting with the council's communications team has highlighted that the central communications plan for the council is to reduce printed material and to move to a digital agenda. In practice this will mean increasing fostering's online presence through ad words and using search engine optimisation.

Discussions also centred around renewing the information packs by coming away from a heavy typographic pack to have a 'magazine' that has all the main information for prospective carers and is reader friendly. The plan is to design and roll this out in 2013-14.

Foster Care fortnight – The national strapline for 2013 is Get in the Frame, which will be used by Thurrock so the local media surrounding fostering is consistent with the national information. The business development officer is due to attend a workshop about foster care fortnight and how to make the most of 2013's campaign.

Shared care – after a period of passive recruiting a review is needed for targeted recruitment based on current recruitment and projected need.

Website and online

Table 1.1	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Number of visitors to website	180	241	142	160	177	216	233	234	149
New/Returning Visitors	154/26	178/63	121/21	123/37	144/33	147/69	170/63	192/42	113/36

Table 1.1 shows that the peak time people have been looking at our website are May, November and October. These have been months where advertising has been peak (May – Foster Care Fortnight, October – Open evening). The interesting statistic is the November website hits as there was no specific fostering advertising

during this period, but there was adoption advertising and an adoption open evening, so perhaps people showed an interest in fostering as a way to differentiate it from adoption.

I would conclude just from looking at the website hits that advertising is key to both enquiries into the office and also passive enquiries. Advertising has to be paramount throughout the year as it not only indicates success of enquiries but it is also planting the seed for future applicants.

In order to fully get to grips with the progression online, one-two hours per week must be dedicated to sourcing material to post for Facebook and Twitter. This should ideally be completed a month in advance.

Another area for online expansion would be Pinterest, which can be used to post items for our existing foster carers which can function like an online magazine. This should be started over the summer 2013.

Ethnicity Profiles and BME Progression

The Thurrock profile has changed as school register data currently shows that 10% of the population of Thurrock are from Black and Ethnic Minorities communities with 25% of Primary and 20% of Secondary school pupils coming from these groups. (Dec 12)

Update of children's ethnicity profile (7/12/12)

White British	189
Other White	3
Gypsy/Roma	12
Mixed White/Black African	5
Mixed White/Asian	2
Any other mixed	11
Pakistani	1
Any other Asian	19
African	10
Any other black	3
Any other ethnic group	7
Still unknown	1

Recruitment has to be driven by the Looked After Children population, and it is important to recognise changes; which will inform future recruitment. The monthly recruitment meetings held between assessment/recruitment team, Therapeutic team, duty and service manager look in detail at the children and foster carers coming through, and this includes ethnicity and age profiles

The local Thurrock Racial Unity Support Taskgroup (TRUST) will continue to be approached to help disseminate information to their groups. They are re-launching their brand and website in January 2013 and Thurrock Fostering will investigate the opportunity to work with TRUST in which a joint approach can help Thurrock Fostering reach BME communities.

The local churches and BME associations will also be approached during 2013/14 with information and the possibility of having a guest speaker from the team talk about fostering and the need for BME carers.

Recruitment team to attend the Council's BME group to promote fostering and to also get ideas and suggestions about where they think effective recruitment could take place. This to be arranged through corporate diversity.