

<b>13 June 2013</b>		<b>ITEM: 6</b>
<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b>		
<b>Thurrock Fostering Service 2012-2013</b>		
<b>Report of:</b> Roland Minto (Service Manager)		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Non-key	
<b>Accountable Head of Service:</b> Barbara Foster		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Carmel Littleton		
<b>This report is public</b>		
<b>Purpose of Report:</b> to provide members of the Corporate Parenting Committee with relevant information regarding the performance and development of the Thurrock Fostering Service 2012-2013.		

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Thurrock Fostering Service provides a good quality service, as evidenced by the recent positive Ofsted Inspection. However key challenges exist which will need to be addressed to ensure continuous development and improvement.

### **1. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**The members of the Committee are requested to agree and support the contents of the Report.**

### **2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:**

- 2.1 The number of Looked After Children Thurrock has increased significantly since March 2011. At that point the year end figure was 210, a reduction from the previous year. However since then, and in line with what is reported by many other authorities, we have experienced a steep rise, to 240 a year later. This rise has continued into 2012-13, fluctuating generally in the range 255-260 for most of the last year.

On the date of writing we have 267 Looked After Children, but inevitably this will continue to fluctuate. This reflects a rate of approximately 70 per 10,000,

children which is above the last reported average figures both nationally and for our statistical neighbours.`

- 2.2 Over previous years Thurrock has managed to maintain a high level of children placed in foster care (either in-house or Independent Sector), and recorded 82% in this category for 2011-2012, compared to 75% nationally. We are still achieving close to 83% for children in Foster care.
- 2.3 However there has been a significant shift in the balance of in-house/IFA placements. According to comparative data supplied through the CIPFA Benchmarking exercise, at 31.3.2012 approximately 61% of those fostered in Thurrock were in-house and 39% in IFA placements. This reflected a reduction in the relative number of in-house placements on the previous year, a trend which has continued throughout 2012-13, so that at year end we saw a roughly equal split between in-house and IFA placements by Thurrock.
- 2.4 This change has resulted from in-house provision having been close to maximum capacity previously, and we have been unable to recruit sufficient new Foster Carers to accommodate the rise in demand caused by the increase in Looked After Children. This will be further discussed below.

### **3. STRUCTURE AND STAFFING:**

- 3.1 The Fostering service is located within Care and Targeted Outcomes, which is part of Children's Services. The Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes is Barbara Foster, who is the nominated decision maker for the Fostering Service. The Fostering Service is operationally managed by Roland Minto, Service Manager, Placements and Support.
- 3.2 Fostering is made up of 4 teams:
  - Foster Care Support Team
  - Therapeutic Foster Care Team
  - Supported Lodgings Team
  - Recruitment and Assessment Team

Additionally Thurrock also recruits and retains a group of Shared Carers, who are managed operationally from within the Team for Disabled Children. A Steering Group attended by staff and managers from both Fostering and the Team for Disabled Children meets quarterly to ensure appropriate coordination between the services.

A structure chart is attached as an Appendix.

- 3.3 In addition to managing a large group of our in-house Carers, the Foster Care Support Team also staff our Placements Duty system, thus responding to new placement requests either for new entrants to care or placement moves.

- 3.4 Whilst Thurrock Fostering Service generally enjoys a high level of staffing stability, the last few months have proven particularly challenging. Unfortunately since July 2012 the Team Manager for the Foster Care Support Team has been off sick, with a serious illness. It is anticipated that she will make a full recovery and return to work in early summer 2013. Interim management measures have been put in place but this has obviously had a significant impact on the continuity of the service.
- 3.5 In addition one of the Social Workers in this Team went on Maternity Leave from October 2012, and another unqualified member of the Team went on placement in January 2013 as part of her professional Social Work Training. Agreement was received to recruit an Agency worker to cover some of the resulting shortfall. This was done although unfortunately it took longer than we wished to identify someone appropriate, and this did temporarily reduce the effectiveness of support to carers.
- 3.6 To compound these difficulties the Fostering Service also lost two of its admin staff in December, one of whom had been in post for several years, and whilst replacements were found without undue delay, this has inevitably added to the sense of change and uncertainty for the team and some Foster Carers.
- 3.7 However one positive change for the service was the appointment from September to a new post of Social Work Adviser on Resources. This post was created primarily to oversee our use of external placements, but also to manage many aspects of the Placement Duty system, thus freeing up some capacity of the Foster Care Support Team to develop our in-house provision. Unfortunately the long term sickness has delayed us experiencing the full benefit of this arrangement.

#### **4. FOSTER CARERS:**

- 4.1 At the end of January 2013 we had 110 approved Foster Carer households. These are divided into different categories, as follows:
- Level 1 – 31
  - Level 2 – 13
  - Level 3 – 19
  - Therapeutic Fostering Team – 14
  - Connected Person (previously known as Friends and Family) - 12
  - Supported Lodgings – 10
  - Shared Care 11
- 4.2 Generally new carers begin as Level 1, and are able to progress to Level 2 through demonstration of their skills over the initial period. Level 3 and Therapeutic Team Foster Carers have more extensive expectations placed upon them in terms of availability and tasks undertaken, whilst Supported Lodgings Carers focus specifically on young people 16+, preparing them for independence. Where appropriate they will continue to care for young people beyond their eighteen birthday.

- 4.3 Our current stock of Foster Carers is overwhelmingly of White British ethnicity, which is consistent with the historical profile of children looked after by the authority. However, in light of the changing demographic profile of the authority it is essential that future recruitment activity includes some specific targeting of Black and Ethnic Minority carers.
- 4.4 As highlighted previously, Thurrock's previous ability to provide the majority of foster care in-house has been severely compromised by the rise in Looked After Children, which has not been matched by our ability to recruit new carers, although our aim remains to provide in-house where possible.
- 4.5 Recruiting new Foster Carers is a challenge for most local authorities, who are effectively competing with each other and the independent sector. Our approach is recorded in our Fostering Recruitment Strategy April 2012 – March 2014, which was refreshed for 2013 -2015 in April this year. Further activity is planned to review our advertising strategy.
- 4.6 We have maintained many of our previous recruitment strategies, and sought to identify new options, such as the use of electronic media such as Facebook to attract new enquiries and applications. In addition in January 2013 we maintained a stand in Lakeside Shopping Centre for a week. This led to a significant number of enquiries, but sadly this did not generate a corresponding increase in appropriate applications.
- 4.7 However the single factor which has been cited by existing carers as a barrier to new applicants choosing to become foster carers for Thurrock is a widening differential between the financial payments being offered both by other local authorities and the independent sector. Financial support is divided into two elements, the age appropriate Boarding Out Allowance, which covers the actual costs incurred in caring for the child/young person, and the fee or "reward" element. Broadly speaking Thurrock has remained competitive on the Boarding Out element, having decided over the last two years to observe the Fostering Network recommended payment levels.
- 4.8 Unfortunately Thurrock has become less attractive than neighbouring authorities in terms of the reward element, particularly Essex, who increased their payment levels in autumn 2011. This has not led to any leaking away of existing carers but we recognise this does not assist our recruitment of new carers.
- 4.9 A proposal was therefore put to DMT in early summer 2012 to make a growth bid for a significant injection of money to boost foster carer payments, particularly for newer carers, and a formal proposal was made for an additional £307,000 for the 2013-14 budget. This was widely supported in principle, but obviously needed to be considered in the wider context of the authority's financial position and the many other competing demands. A reduced proposal was therefore successfully taken to full Council in March 2013.
- 4.10 As part of implementing any increase in the reward element of payments to Foster Carers, we are intending to review some aspects of the previous

structure, by clarifying expectations of Level 3 Carers, and in particular giving serious consideration to removing the distinction between Level 1 and Level 2, as we are unconvinced that this remains a meaningful distinction.

- 4.11 One positive development of the last year has been the reconstitution of the local Foster Carers Association. The stated aim of the Association is “to provide information and advice, support, development, learning opportunities and also to organise social events for Foster Carers for both their children and the children in their care. This will be in partnership with the local authority.”
- 4.12 Whilst in the relatively early stages of development, the Association has already organised some social events. Perhaps more significantly we have established permanent co-option of the Chair and Vice-Chair on to the Corporate Parenting Committee, thus conveying official recognition of the key role they may play.
- 4.13 As a by-product of this development, work has also taken place to put in place a formal Foster Carers Charter, as encouraged by central government. The text of this has been discussed and formal sign off is almost complete.

## **5. BUDGETS**

- 5.1 The combined revised budget across the teams for 2012-2013 was £3,535,495. Approximately £785,000 of this is staffing costs with the remainder largely allocated to payments to Foster Carers.
- 5.2 Our year end out-turn for 2012-2013 remained within budget across the service as a whole, although there will need to be some reallocation between teams for 2013-14 to ensure the appropriate finance is in the correct cost centres in acknowledgement of movement of carers between teams and based on which children are located where in the service.
- 5.3 Although the growth bid to improve payments to carers will increase expenditure within the service, in the longer term this should help reduce costs elsewhere for the authority, notably in the External Placements Budget.

## **6. PANEL AND ASSESSMENTS**

- 6.1 Thurrock’s Fostering Panel is chaired independently by a very experienced and knowledgeable individual, who works in close liaison with the Team Manager of the Recruitment and Assessment Team to ensure that cases are presented for consideration and recommendations made to the Agency Decision Maker in line with the statutory regulations. The Panel functions robustly in challenging assessments, and has on occasion declined to recommend approval.

6.2 The Fostering Panel met regularly in 2012-2013, and by March had considered seventeen Form F assessments. A high proportion (9/17) of these were for Connected Person (otherwise known as “Family and Friends”) assessments. This is a legal requirement to ensure that when the authority places looked after children within children’s existing networks we have undertaken a full assessment of the carers. Generally children are already placed on the basis of Temporary Approval so it is essential that these assessments are allocated as a priority to meet the legal timescales. Unfortunately these carers do not add to our stock of flexible resources, to be used for other children. They nevertheless consume a significant amount of the staffing resource available for assessments.

6.3 By early March Panel had recommended the approval of:

- 3 Level 1 households
- 2 Therapeutic Foster Carers
- 2 Supported Lodgings Carers
- 1 Shared Carer
- 7 Connected Persons Carers

6.4 Of the seventeen assessments taken to Panel, twelve were for carers of White British ethnicity, one was Black African, one was Black Caribbean, two were of different Asian ethnicities, and one dual heritage.

## 7. OFSTED INSPECTION

7.1 The Fostering Service is currently subject to a specific inspection from Ofsted. The previous inspection visit was in March 2008 at which time the overall judgement was Satisfactory, with Good judgements on two of the five outcome areas assessed.

7.2 We received our most recent inspection in March 2013, and were pleased that the final report reflected a number of key improvements, with an overall judgement of Good, with further judgements of Good in all areas except Leadership and Management, which was judged as Adequate. This latter judgement stemmed from deficits which we acknowledged with respect of formal monitoring processes, and steps have been taken to ensure these are appropriately addressed.

7.3 As a service we found the experience of being inspected helpful in sharpening our focus on what we need to achieve going forward.

7.4 The final report describes “*a motivated experienced and qualified staff team who are clearly focused on improving outcomes for children and young people in foster care*”, and says that the service “*has demonstrated a capacity for continuing improvement....*”

7.5 However particularly pleasing were some of the comments in the Report about our foster carers, and the things young people said about them.

- 7.5.1 *Children and young people have positive views about the quality of their care and their relationships with foster carers.*
- 7.5.2 *Foster carers are passionate about providing the best possible care and they advocate for children and young people.*
- 7.6 Children and young people's experiences of the fostering service are positive, and they rate the service as good or brilliant. Some children and young people felt that their individual carers were outstanding and were extremely positive people in their life.
- 7.7 This inspection may be the last specific inspection of our Fostering Service, as there is a proposal that in the future this will be integrated into an overall inspection for all local authorities of their services to Looked After Children and Care Leavers. It will therefore be important to respond to any recommendations promptly to ensure that future judgements across the whole service area are not adversely affected.
- 7.8 A particular area of placement need, highlighted by Ofsted, is that of mother and baby placements. We have successfully made some such placements in-house, but requests for these appear to be on the increase for cases in Care Proceedings. We therefore need to review our current capacity, in terms of both numbers and expertise, and seek to develop this as a specialist area. Similarly we need to develop our capacity to place both young people on remand into Foster Placements, and also to address the difficulty we face on occasion in placing siblings together. This latter group has been a significant challenge in the last year.
- 7.9 We are currently developing our service plans for the next year, with a keen emphasis on our services to Care Leavers. As part of this process, some essential procedures, such as our Staying Put Policy on over-eighteens remaining in placement, are currently in draft form, and need to be finalised. This has to be a priority for the first quarter of 2013-2014.
- 7.10 Thurrock Foster Carers benefit from a dedicated post, located in Workforce Development, to develop and coordinate an on-going programme training. Foster Carers generally speak highly of what is available. However a review is needed of some aspects of the programme to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of carers in key areas, such as physical intervention. Similarly we need to continuously seek imaginative ways to deliver refresher Safeguarding Training, particular for carers or partners who also have other employment. It is vital that we engage Carers themselves in identifying the training that will actually assist them to fulfil their roles.
- 7.11 In the context of the latter point, and with regard to how we distribute updated policies to carers, we need to think about how far we can "work smarter" by using electronic distribution / consultation with carers. Most of our Foster Carers now have email addresses, and many use this as a means to communicate on occasion with Supervising Social Workers. However there is

still a significant opportunity for looking at how we develop technologically, for example by developing a revised Foster Carers Handbook which can be accessed on-line.

## **8. IMPLICATIONS**

### **8.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **Michael Jones**  
Telephone and email: **01375 652272**  
**mxjones@thurrock.gov.uk**

There are no significant financial implications arising from this report.

### **8.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**  
Telephone and email: **01375 652054**  
**lindsey.marks@BDTLegsl.org.uk**

There are no significant legal implications arising from this report.

### **8.3 Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Samson DeAlyn**  
Telephone and email: **01375 652472**  
**sdealyn@thurrock.gov.uk**

The main diversity implication arising from the report is the need to ensure that as far as is practical the Fostering Service offers placements able to meet the needs of children from the diverse range of children living within Thurrock.

### **8.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Section 17, Risk Assessment, Health Impact Assessment, Sustainability, IT, Environmental**

**BACKGROUND PAPERS USED IN PREPARING THIS REPORT (include their location and identify whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):**

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**APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT:**

- Structure Chart



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