

18 July 2023		ITEM: 9
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Recruitment of Foster Carers		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: None	
Report of: Liz Shields – Service Manager Fostering, Adoption, CWDT and placements		
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon – Assistant Director, Children’s Services and Early Help		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy – Corporate Director of Children’s Services		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

This report provides an outline to the Corporate Parenting Committee of the progress in recruitment activity for Foster Carers. There has been a great deal of activity to recruit more households to foster for Thurrock. This has resulted in application and successful approvals.

The need to recruit more foster carers remains and more applications are required to meet the needs of looked after children in Thurrock. We have bench marked ourselves against our nearest competitors in order to ensure that our offer to foster carers is both attractive and competitive.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That Members are updated on the current progress in Fostering Recruitment**
- 1.2 That Members are aware of the key areas for improvements.**
- 1.3 That Members are aware of the challenges the local authority is experiencing in recruiting foster carers and what we are doing to address these.**

2. Introduction and Background

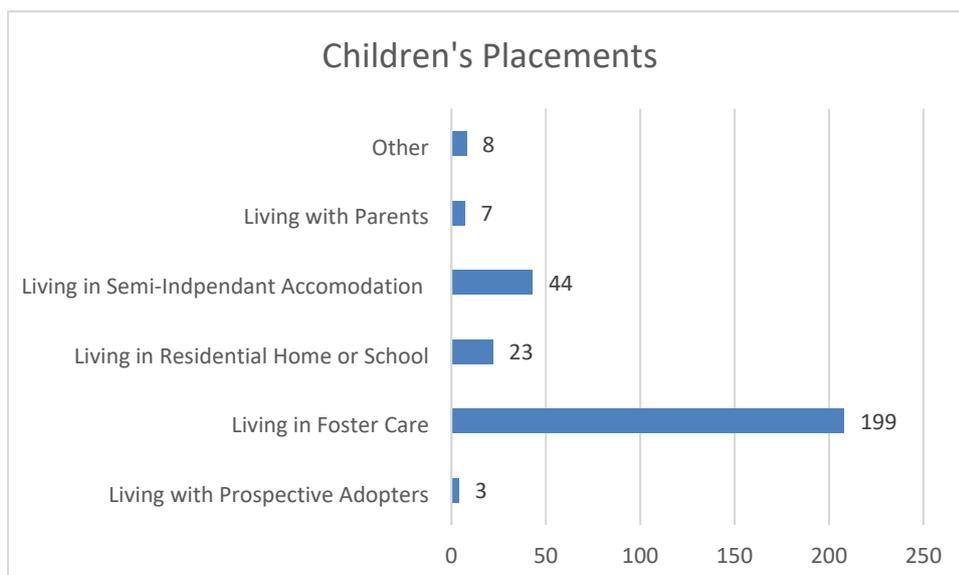
2.1 Sufficiency of Foster Placements

There is a statutory requirement to ensure there is sufficiency of placements for Thurrock Looked After children. The overall context for meeting the sufficiency duty is set out in the statutory guidance:

“Securing sufficient accommodation that meets the needs of Children Looked After is a vital step in delivering improved outcomes for this vulnerable group. Having the right placement in the right place, at the right time is a critical success factor in relation to the delivery of better outcomes for Children Looked After.”

When a child is unable to live with their birth family there are a range of options that can be considered to meet their needs whilst they are living away from home. This could be to live with foster carers or reside in the care of family friends or family of the child (these carers are known as ‘connected persons’ approved under a fostering approval know as regulation 24); live in a residential home or, for some older children over the age of 16 years they are able to live in supported accommodation. The service is dedicated to ensuring children enter into Thurrock’s care only when they need our care and that they are looked after in the right placement and wherever possible this should be within a family setting. Young people should be able to have secure, stable, and settled placements so they can transition into adulthood with the skills to progress to independent living. This report focusses on the approach of Thurrock’s Fostering Service to ensure sufficiency of Thurrock in-house foster carers.

On 31 May 2023 there were 284 children looked after by Thurrock Council. They were placed as follows:



Of the 199 children placed in Foster Care, the breakdown is as follows:

31/05/2023	
Thurrock Approved Carers	
Total number of approved Households	74
Number of children placed with Thurrock Approved Foster Carers	105
Independent and Other Fostering Agencies	
Number of Children Placed	94

The number of children placed with Thurrock approved carers varies throughout the year but it is usual for the range to be between 100-120 children placed with our own foster carers.

Thurrock retains a strong financial and support package to our foster carers. Foster Carers approved by Thurrock, on average, receive a competitive financial package including the Council Tax waiver on top of the weekly allowances. Key recruitment needs are for children aged 13-18 of any gender, for sibling groups of three and for parent and child foster carers. Most applications to foster are for infants or primary age children or respite carers. These applications are welcome but can leave a gap.

In line with national challenges, we are experiencing difficulty in recruiting the volume of foster carers we would like to meet the needs of our children. There continues to be significant recruitment activity in fostering to recruit new foster carers within Thurrock and the surrounding area. A wide array of engagement events has been held in and around Thurrock and our brand is visible in the Thurrock Community.

In May 2023 we ran a 2-week focused campaign as part of the National event Foster Care Fortnight. This focused on awareness raising and local engagement in line with this year's theme 'fostering communities'. Our existing carers supported the recruitment team in holding over 17 events over the 2 weeks engaging with local businesses and community groups to engage the public. The team held face to face and virtual information sessions as well as running a targeted social media campaign. We also launched our first ever recruitment newsletter which will be sent quarterly to all households who have enquired previously but not progressed to a full assessment. This is based on behavioural insights research which tells us that most people think about fostering for many years before progressing to a full assessment. This allows us to continue to engage with the public around the ongoing need as well as providing them with useful reading and tools to increase their knowledge and skills so that they are better prepared if they do decide to progress. The campaign has shown success in terms of engagement with a large increase in reach (51,931 Facebook impressions in May 23) and clicks for social media during the period as well as the highest number of enquiries taken in one month since the start of the covid pandemic at 30 new enquiries for May 23.

As part of Foster Care Fortnight we also reiterated our pledge to our current foster carers to support them in their role by launching a new retention programme. This is being co-written with our foster carers to focus on what they need from the service to be able to continue fostering for Thurrock and looking after our children for years to come.

2.2 The National Picture

Ofsted provide annual statistics on the national picture for fostering¹. It last reported in November 2022. Key points from the report in terms of recruitment are:

- There are fewer foster placements available nationally at 31 March 2022 than there were at the same time in 2018
- Over the last five years there has been fewer households applying to foster even when there is a good level of enquiries
- Nationally 45% of all children fostered are fostered by an independent Fostering Agency
- Foster Carers are much more likely to foster for a longer career if they are registered with a local authority

In February 2023 the Department for Education set out its response to the National Care Review². Key highlights for fostering are:

- The Government will support a campaign to recruit 3000 more foster carers nationally, this will be piloted in the Northeast in 2023 and to other regions in 2024
- The national minimum allowance (not fees) for foster carers will increase by 12.43% in April 2023 for each area. This is funded via the existing Social Care Grant in 2023/04, the distribution of which is agreed at a local level
- Support for kinship arrangements are to be reviewed which could lower the demand for foster placements in years to come by preventing children from coming in to care and enabling more children to live with family members as private arrangements. The Government will clarify the detail of how this can be achieved later in 2023

In May 2023 the Department for Education set out a further paper with details of their pilot plans for fostering services.

The DfE writes:

We have pledged to put love, relationships, and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care. When care is the best choice for a child, it is critical that

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2021-to-31-march-2022/fostering-in-england-1-april-2021-to-31-march-2022>

²

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133537/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf

the care system provides stable, loving homes close to children's communities. Homes that provide consistency, stability and warmth. To start changing the way we provide stable, loving homes for children in care, over the next two years the government has pledged to deliver a fostering recruitment and retention programme so foster care is available for more children who need it, investing over £27 million over the next two years. This will boost approvals of foster carers in areas of specific shortage, as well as addressing retention through better support to existing foster carers.

The programme is designed to deliver end-to-end improvements that support boosting foster carer numbers: starting with attracting new leads to and expanded support offer to those already fostering. The programme includes:

- A recruitment support hub to provide information about fostering and support alongside the assessment and approval process to maximise the number of people who take forward a fostering application
- A marketing campaign to attract new foster carers
- Roll out of Mockingbird - an evidence-based programme across the region to support retention of foster carers

2.3 Recruitment Activity

2021/2022

- Newly Approved Foster Carers = 11 Households
- Applications made that did not result in approval = 17 Households
- Left Fostering = 13

2022/23

- Newly Approved Foster Carers = 6 Households
- Applications made that did not result in approval = 7 Households
- Left Fostering = 11

2023/24

- 8 Households applications are being assessed as suitable to foster which should result in 12 placements if fully used.

For the last 2 years, households who ceased fostering did so for a range of reasons. The vast majority retired. A small number left for other reasons, such as, their own health, standards of care concerns and due to changes in their family circumstances. No household left Thurrock Fostering to join another fostering agency which is positive.

2.4 Thurrock's Fostering Demographic

Thurrock like most authorities has an ageing fostering population which means that each year we are likely to lose some of our valuable and

experienced foster carers to retirement from fostering. The majority of our foster carers are aged 40-65. Our recruitment activity seeks to recruit enough carers to keep our number of fostering households stable and to grow our capacity. Despite significant recruitment activity, this has been challenging to do.

We are seeing a shift in new applications to some extent to families with their own younger children. We will respond to this by ensuring that there is good matching alongside their own children and support for children already living in their household to ensure that fostering does not impact on them.

Progress of applications (year to date compared to last year):

	April	May	Total YTD	2022/23 total for year
Number of households attending Information Sessions	3	4	7	26
Number of formal Enquiries ³	13	30	43	160
Number of IVs completed	3	0	3	35
Number of Applications Received	1	1	2	15
Number of applications dropped out	0	1	1	9
Numbers of approved foster carers (HH)	1	1	2	6

2.5 Advertising Impact:

³ Formal enquiries are when a member of the public shares their contact details with us. Where a general conversation is held but the member of public does not share details these are noted as informal enquiries (see appendix 1)

The following table sets out which adverts have been referred to by applicants when a formal enquiry is made for the financial year 2022/23:

Advert	Reports
Thurrock Council Offices/Website/jobsite	58
Facebook/Social media apps	40
Follow up card/Calendar/Xmas card	3
Gazette	4
Google Search/Online	18
Lakeside/Event/Drop-in	23
Lamppost (Grays Bus Station)	2
Leaflet through door (including Council Tax leaflet)	2
Reach/Local iQ (started 22 Dec)	27
Nothing Noted / nothing seen	3
Other Newspaper/Publication (including Thurrock's residential newsletter)	3
Radio (none at present)	1
Referral (& was previous FC & word of mouth, previous enquired)	34
Roadside Adverts	6
School or Church (Banner or newsletter)	11

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 In terms of recruitment of foster carers, Thurrock is able to recruit and support enough foster carers to keep the current number of children placed in house stable. This is, however, not sufficient for our ambition to increase the numbers people fostering for Thurrock and making sure children are placed locally.

To improve recruitment the service is reviewing our offer to Thurrock Foster Carers to ensure that we are competitive with our nearest competitors.

Following a review of our recruitment approach the plan is to launch a combined fostering recruitment and retention programme to reflect the need to not only recruit more carers but to support and sustain the current cohort. This will especially focus on equipping those at the start of their fostering journey to have everything they need to do the role. The work will focus on the support offer and addressing any issues carers face beyond the financial element. This will include building a clear sense of being a cohesive fostering community that will not only retain those already fostering with Thurrock but will form part of the rhetoric around what you are joining when you foster with Thurrock.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

4.1 Members to note and consider the options available

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

5.1 We consult monthly with our foster carers via a group focussed on recruitment. Their views and ideas are included into our planning.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

6.1 None

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

The increased recruitment of foster carers will assist in the reduction of Independent Fostering Agencies and support the Council with their own cohort of foster carers. An increase in the number of internal foster carers would support the placements budget position.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)

Thurrock Council is a registered Fostering Agency and recruits Foster Carers in line with its statement of purpose. The statement of purpose sets a framework for all of the business of the fostering agency and is required to be consistent with the Fostering Services Regulations 2011, the National Minimum Standards 2011, and the amended regulations.

The Council has a duty under Section 22 G of the Children Act 1989, so far as reasonably practicable, to secure accommodation for looked after children in the Council area, which meets the needs of those children: where this is consistent with those children's welfare.

Section 22C specifies that the provision of a foster placement is one of the ways the Council may provide that accommodation. The placement, so as is reasonably practicable must:

a) Allow the child to live near his/her home;

- b) Not disrupt the child's education or training;
- c) Enable siblings to live together
- d) Meet a disabled child's particular needs
- e) Is within the Council's area

The successful recruitment of foster carers will assist the Council in meeting these duties

7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by:

Roxanne Scanlon
Community Engagement and Project
Monitoring Officer

Applications to foster are welcomed from anyone of any background who wishes to apply. They are assessed against the National Minimum Fostering Standards and individual needs, circumstances etc. are addressed in detail.

The Fostering Service is committed to furthering equality, promoting diversity and eliminating discrimination in all its forms. We are committed to placing the needs of children first; to recognise children, young people and carers as individuals, and to treat our service users, carers and partner agencies with dignity and respect. We are also committed to raising the profile of equality and diversity issues across the Council.

The Fostering Service actively and consciously values diversity and difference and seeks to provide a high-quality service and fair and equal treatment for all our carers, children and young people. Our approach to promoting equality and diversity is to provide bespoke services, with due consideration and sensitivity to the complex needs of children and young people and families. Increasing the numbers of foster carers provides greater choice of placements for looked after children and improved matching of children with carers. This will support our Thurrock children to fulfil their potential as they have homes providing stability.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

- Impact on Looked After Children

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- Thurrock Fostering Statement of Purpose
- Payments to Foster Carers Policy
- Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation Children's Social Care Reform 2023
(<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uplo>

[ads/attachment_data/file/1133537/Children s social care stable homes consultation February 2023.pdf](#))

- Fostering in England 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2021-to-31-march-2022/fostering-in-england-1-april-2021-to-31-march-2022>)

9. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1 – Table of Completed Fostering Recruitment Events

Report Author:

Liz Shields – Service Manager

Appendix 1: Table of Completed Fostering Recruitment Events 22/23

Date	Time	Location	Type of event
Monday 15 May	10am to 2pm	Sainsburys Chafford Hundred	Drop-in information stand
Monday 15 May	4pm to 7pm	c2c Chafford Hundred train station	Drop-in information stand
Tuesday 16 May	10am to 3pm	John Lewis, Bluewater	Drop-in information stand
Wednesday 17 May	10am to 1pm	Tilbury Library	Drop-in information stand
Wednesday 17 May	10am to 2pm	Impulse Leisure Belhus	Drop-in information stand
Wednesday 17 May	3pm to 7pm	Impulse Leisure Blackshots	Drop-in information stand
Thursday 18 May	10am to 2pm	Morrisons, Grays	Drop-in information stand
Thursday 18 May	10.30am to 3pm	Waitrose Billericay	Drop-in information stand
Thursday 18 May	6pm to 8pm	Microsoft Teams	Virtual information session
Friday 19 May	7am to 10am	c2c Pitsea train station	Drop-in information stand
Friday 19 May	2pm to 4:30pm	Chadwell Library	Drop-in information stand
Saturday 20 May	8:30am to 10am	Park Run, Thurrock, Orsett Heath	Drop-in information stand
Saturday 20 May	11am to 3pm	Sainsburys Chafford Hundred	Drop-in information stand
Monday 22 May	10am to 2pm	Asda Tilbury	Drop-in information stand
Tuesday 23 May	7am to 10am	c2c Fenchurch Street station	Drop-in information stand
Tuesday 23 May	1pm to 3pm	Civic Offices, Grays	In person information session
Wednesday 24 May	9am to 9pm	Lakeside Shopping Centre, outside Primark Level 2	Drop-in information stand
Thursday 25 May	10am to 3pm	John Lewis, Chelmsford	Drop-in information stand
Friday 26 May	10am to 2pm	Morrisons Grays	Drop-in information stand

