



Northumberland

County Council

Families and Children Overview and Scrutiny

DATE: 5TH DECEMBER 2019

The Annual Report of Northumberland County Council Fostering Service 2018-19

Report of the Executive Director of Adult & Children's Services, Cath McEvoy-Carr
Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Councillor Wayne Daley

Purpose of report

To provide an overview of the Fostering Service 2018/19. In line with statutory guidance and regulation, all Fostering Services have to provide a report on the outcomes of the service.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- 1) Members note the report and its content.
- 2) Members acknowledge the report and performance information in regard to the period April 2018 – March 2019.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the priorities regarding Living, Enjoying, Connecting and Thriving priorities included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2021.

Key issues

1. The service to continue to recruit, retain and maintain a stable cohort of foster carers, to meet the placement needs of looked after children.
2. To ensure foster carers receive a high level of support and development opportunities, by the service and other professionals, to assist and empower them to look after the children and young people placed with them.
3. The agency to continue to successfully operate on a day to day basis in line with the Fostering National Minimum Standards & Regulations and other relevant legislation.

Background

Introduction

This report provides an overview of the main developments relating to the Fostering Service during the period 1st April 2018 to 31st March 2019.

1. Annual Dataset

The fostering activity for 2018/19 is collated via an annual dataset. The dataset is submitted by all Fostering Services to Ofsted. The data is then collated to give a national picture of fostering in both local authorities and independent fostering agencies.

The data set and other DfE Returns for 2018/19 (as at 31st March 2019) reflected the following:

- Northumberland had 373 children in care. This equates to a rate of 63 children per 10,000
- The largest cohort of children in care is children aged between 10 - 15 years
- 47% are girls and 53% are boys
- 74% of our children in care are placed within a 20 mile radius of the family home. This enables family and friend connections to be maintained that in turn supports placement stability.
- 84% of our foster children placed with in-house foster carers.
- 89% of sibling groups placed together as identified in the child's plan - compared to the England national average of 83% and the North East national average of 87%
- 323 total approved carers in 188 households (at 31st March) - the previous year was 290 in 165 households
- 18% are permanent foster carers which is higher than the previous year figure of 15%
- 28% are placed with family and friends carers
- The proportion of the looked after children population that had three or more placements in the previous 12 months remains better than the national average at 9%.
- Of the 184 children who left care in the year ending March 2019, 37 were adopted – equating to 24%, which is better than regional and national averages.
- A further 34 looked after children (22%) were made subject to special guardianship orders in the year – a higher proportion than the national and regional figures of 12% and 15% respectively.

2. Ofsted Inspection

The service was previously inspected under the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework for 'the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers' which incorporates fostering services into the single framework inspection process. The outcome from this inspection is that Children's Services within Northumberland requires improvement to be good.

The full inspection report can be accessed at:

https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/local_authority_reports/northumb erland/052_Single%20inspection%20of%20LA%20children's%20services%20and%20review%20of%20the%20LSCB%20as%20pdf.pdf

Future inspections will be under the local authority children's service (ILACS) framework that was introduced in January 2018.

3. Fostering Panel

The fostering panel has a crucial role in the provision and monitoring of placements of children in foster care. The panel meets once a month and has an independent chairperson who has significant knowledge and experience of fostering issues. The panel advisor, panel chair and panel members all play a key role in the quality assurance of all documents that are presented to panel. The panel has successfully recruited some new panel members that are establishing themselves within the role of being a panel member.

The fostering panel approve mainstream foster carers, family and friend foster carers, considers all deregistration of foster carers for monitoring purposes and foster carer annual reviews. 14 mainstream foster carers and 21 family and friends fostering assessments were approved by the agency during this time frame.

13 mainstream foster carers and 33 family and friend foster carers were deregistered.

The fostering panel also considers whether the permanence plan for a child should be long term fostering and the decision in regard to matching children to a foster carer long term.

As at 31st March 2019, 44 children are in long term foster placements with Northumberland foster carers with a further 17 children living with family and friends foster carers.

4. Agency Decision Maker

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is the Head of Service, Safeguarding. The ADM is provided with all fostering panel papers and a copy of the final minutes in line with the regulations. The ADM provides any feedback to panels via the panel advisor.

No cases have been referred to the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (IRM) during this timeframe.

5. Recruitment & Retention of Foster Carers

The recruitment and retention of foster carers is a priority. The Fostering Recruitment Campaign has continued throughout 2018/19. Information Evenings continued to be bi-monthly and took place in various venues across the county. A bi-monthly drop-in information sessions at the Family Placement Service was also promoted.

The Family Placement Service has a Recruitment and Marketing Strategy. The aim of this strategy is to recruit carers living in and within reasonable travelling distance of Northumberland who have the skills and qualities to meet the diverse needs of children and young people in our care.

The strategies for fostering recruitment are based on an analysis of practice information including current and emerging areas of need in terms of our children & young people. Targeted recruitment has taken place in regard to carers who could look after sibling groups, look after children long term and teenagers. This is an ongoing challenge for the agency with ongoing specific recruitment for carers for this cohort of children.

Approved foster carers have also been targeted to consider looking after children that they previously might not have considered. This has included delivering a training programme for foster carers to consider looking after children long term. The service has an allocated social worker in the team who leads and coordinates profiles of children that need a long term foster placement. This has impacted positively on the number of foster carers who are now or are considering offering a long term home for children.

Recruiting foster carers is an on-going, year round campaign, with focus at particular time periods e.g. Foster Care Fortnight. These opportunities provide extra support from the press and social media elements of the campaign. The service meets with other local authorities in the region to draw on best practice in regard to the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

All NCC foster carers have an annual membership with Foster Talk funded by the service. Foster Talk is an independent, non-profit organisation providing professional support services to foster carers across the UK.

6. Data

The following information gives some comparisons of data relevant to the fostering service for the last 2 years:

As at 31 st March for each year	Total Number of LAC population	Number of children placed with NCC mainstream foster carers	Number of children placed with NCC family & friends carers	Total number of children with NCC registered foster carers
2017/18	398	164	35	199
2018/19	373	169	38	207

As at 31 st March for each year	Total Number of NCC approved mainstream foster carer households	Number of approved NCC Reg 24 and family & friends carer households	Total Number of NCC registered foster carer households
2017/18	125	41	166
2018/19	125	47	172

The service has not seen an increase or decrease in approved foster carers however the in house capacity to place children has been sustained. Newly approved foster carers are offset by the foster carers that are deregistered. Some of the deregistration of foster carers has been due to a number of reasons including foster carers retiring having moved a young person on to independent living, foster carers adopting children.

17 children are placed with family and friends under a Regulation 24 arrangement. This is a temporary emergency arrangement where the carers are not already approved as foster carers but are known to the child. This is referred to as a connected person who is defined as an individual who is a relative, friend or other person connected with the child. The 2010 Regulations specify the assessment requirements before the child may be placed under these temporary approval arrangements.

A number of young people have remained living with their foster carers in a Staying Put arrangement. As at the end of March 2019, 11 young people aged 18 years or over, continued living with their NCC foster carer and 12 young people aged over 18 years remain living with independent agency foster carers.

7. Foster Carer Support

Foster carers are provided with a high level of support from their allocated supervising social worker. A comprehensive training programme is in place with core training being essential for all foster carers and more specialist courses are also on offer. Foster carers are able to access elearning, training provided by Northumberland Safeguarding Board and internal courses are delivered.

The fostering team are trained to deliver the 'Fostering Changes' course. This enables the staff to apply the principles of this course when supporting and advising foster carers on a range of behaviour management techniques. This course is mandatory for all foster carers therefore will continue to be delivered on a year by year basis.

All foster carers are reviewed annually in line with the regulations, with early reviews taking place if necessary. The review meeting is a face to face meeting and includes information covering a 12 month period. All first annual reviews are presented to the Fostering Panel with an expectation that the foster carers will attend to give feedback on their first year of being a foster carer. Review reports include information from the foster carer, child in placement, child's social worker and the foster carers supervising social worker. Following the meeting a report is completed that summarises the findings, gives recommendations and when required, this report is submitted to the Fostering Panel for consideration. The review process is also an opportunity for foster carers to give feedback both verbally and in writing in regard to the support they have received.

All foster carers are allocated a supervising social worker who undertakes regular supervision with the foster carer.

The Foster Carer Support Groups take place regularly across the county. These are delivered by the supervising social worker and include opportunities for external speakers to attend to discuss key topics, informal support to each other and the sharing of good practice. The groups are also used to get feedback and to consult with foster carers on any key issues or areas of service development.

Various events have taken place for looked after children, children of foster carers and foster carers over the year that has included, trips to Whitehouse Farm - including the Christmas Wonderland event, pantomime trip, Light Water Valley.

Activity residential camps took place for a number of children giving them the opportunity to enjoy inspiring new experiences. All the children were supported by a specially selected team of youth workers, in addition to the experienced staff at the Brathay Trust in Cumbria and Dukeshouse Wood in Northumberland. The groups participated in self-esteem and team building exercises across a variety of outdoor fun challenges.

The children of foster carer group has continued to meet to participate in a number of activities. The purpose of the group is to support the children of foster carers and for children to share their own experiences of living in a household that fosters. The group has become more established over this time period so it is hoped this will develop further in regard to influencing service development in the next 12 months.

8. Reliance on Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's)

The Local Authority has continued to reduce its reliance on the number of children being placed in IFA placements. IFA's placements are resourced if the needs of the child can not be met by an in house placement, for example, large sibling groups being accommodated, assessed needs of the child.

IFA placements place a significant financial pressure on the Local Authority. Monitoring and approval systems are in established in regard to tracking these placements.

The number of children placed in IFA's as at the end of the financial year 2018/19 is:

As at 31st March for each year	Total number of children in IFA placements
2016/17	60
2017/18	57
2018/19	43

As at the 31st March 2019, 28 children have had their placement in an IFA agreed as long term.

9. Outcomes for Looked After Children

The success of looked after children is hugely dependent on the high quality care each child receives. Foster carers are encouraged to ensure they provide children and young people with the opportunity to reach their full potential in all areas of development for example, formal educational environment, recreational activities. The training that is in place for foster carers supports, equips and enhances the necessary skills to do this, for example, Making Sense of Education Services, Reading with Children & Young People.

Support is provided for looked after children from a whole range of services including the Education Support for Looked After Children's Team (ESLAC), Community Support Teams, dedicated health team for looked after children.

Children and young people in foster care are encouraged to participate with the children in care council – Voices Making Choices. The 'Mind of my Own' app (MOMO) is promoted with foster carers so they can support the child in their care to maximise giving feedback and communication with key professionals.

Foster carers generally understand their role as corporate parents. Attributes of foster carers included patience, listening, nurturing, being non-judgemental, resilient with a strong ability to see the world from the child's perspective. Despite some challenging times that foster carers have had with some children, this does not deter them from continuing with their vocation of being a foster carer.

10. Aims & Objectives 2019/20

The service will continue to successfully operate on a day to day basis in line with the Fostering National Minimum Standards & Regulations and other key legislation.

The key aims and objectives for 2019/20 are:

- Continue to increase placement availability and choice ensuring the service remains inclusive and engaging to all, while maintaining a focus on a number of key targeted audiences, for example, sibling groups, older children, long term placements
- Aim to increase the number of looked after children to be looked after in a family placement
- Further improve the timeliness and process for matching children in long term placement in line with the child's plan and celebrate this
- The service to ensure it effectively delivers training that supports the developmental needs and demands of foster carers
- To review the core offer to foster carers
- To embed the Family Placement Service structure changes
- To continue to offer residential camp opportunities for 2019/20 given the positive impact this has had on the children that participated in previous camps
- To involve care experienced young people in the delivery of training to foster carers.

Implications

Policy	Northumberland Fostering and Adoption Services Manual. Fostering Service Statement of Purpose. Corporate Parenting Strategy. Other relevant legislation as detailed below.
Finance and value for money	The Family Placement Service has a budget that is closely monitored to ensure value for money in regard to the placements and provision it provides. No additional funding is required.
Legal	Fostering National Minimum Standards and Regulations 2011 (England) Children Act 1989 and 2004 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 (England) The above mentioned policies, procedures and guidance.
Procurement	None
Human Resources	None
Property	None
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	
Risk Assessment	This report is part of the Risk Management systems in place to check on the standards and service provision of looked after children in foster placements.
Crime & Disorder	None
Health and Wellbeing	Improvements to the health and wellbeing of our looked after children and foster carers
Customer Consideration	None
Carbon reduction	None
Wards	None

Background papers:

Useful Links

- NCC Fostering Service webpage
<http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Children/Looked-after/Fostering.aspx>
- Fostering National Minimum Standards and Regulations
www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-services-national-minimum-standards
- NCC Virtual School for Looked After Children webpage
<http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=12414>
- Staying Put Guidance
www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-put-arrangements-for-care-leavers-aged-18-years-and-above
- Foster Talk website
<https://www.fostertalk.org>
- Ofsted's framework and guidance for inspecting local authority services for children in need of help and protection, children in care and care leavers
www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

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