

Report to: **Social Services & Health Scrutiny Committee**

Date: **25 September 2003**

By: **Director of Social Services**

Title of report: **Report on the Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers**

Purpose of report: **To advise Committee of activity to recruit and retain foster carers**

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**The Scrutiny Committee is recommended to**

**A. Note the contents of the report.**

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### **1. Financial Appraisal**

1.1 The recruitment and retention of foster carers represents a key best value objective for the Council in terms of reducing dependence upon costly residential care and independent fostering agencies. The performance measure is to recruit 30 new foster carers by 31/03/04.

### **2. Background Information**

2.1 At its meeting on 31 July, the Committee asked for further details concerning the recruitment of foster carers. The National Fostering Network estimates that there are 48,000 children in need of fostering on any one day, but there is a national shortage of 8,000 foster carers. The Department of Health information is that the numbers of foster carers has remained steady at approximately 32,000 for the last three years despite increased recruitment activity.

2.2 The majority of local authorities in the region report an increase in the numbers of looked after children because more children are entering the care system and are then staying longer. The need for placements is difficult to predict because the LAC population is volatile, with accommodation services reacting to unexpected demands such as large sibling groups, challenging teenagers, children with disabilities, new born babies and asylum seekers.

2.3 Each authority in the region reports a shortage of foster carers. The shortage of people coming forward to foster is due to a number of factors such as the wider economic conditions, the increased availability of more flexible employment, the increased challenges presented by looked after children and increased expectations resulting from the introduction of national standards. Authorities are also increasingly having to compete with each other and with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) to attract foster carers. Authorities report that although they are not losing large numbers of carers to the IFAs, there are more and more IFAs seeking carers. This can lead to a shrinking resource base, as carers lost through 'natural wastage' are not replaced. Natural wastage can account for between 10-15 per cent of the pool of carers per annum.

2.4 Experienced carers soon become full with children needing placement stability, so reducing the pool of available carers and placement choice. It is difficult to replace experienced carers because new foster carers are often very inexperienced, starting out as respite carers or carers of younger or 'easier' children, offering a much more limited resource. There is a risk of quickly losing new carers who feel overburdened by being asked to care for the challenging and complex children who need placements.

### **3. East Sussex Fostering Service Activity**

3.1 The ESCC Fostering Service has put in place a comprehensive recruitment strategy based on the best evidence of what works; developing a professional marketing identity and materials, dedicated recruitment activity, basing recruitment activity around local events, web sites, articles and features in the local media to raise the profile of fostering. The Service set aside a specific budget in 2003/04 to establish a professional marketing campaign and materials and to kick start a rolling programme of recruitment. The Service recruited 28 new carers in 2002/03, a net increase of 8 carers due to natural wastage. Some of the carers who left were very experienced, while others had not provided a placement for significant periods.

3.2 The Service is also targeting recruitment of particular types of carers such as mother and baby placements, adolescent placements and permanence placements, based on analysis of the known and predicted needs of children in the care of the Council. The strategy includes an expansion of kinship carers or family and friends carers. The capacity to recruit carers is highly dependent upon the availability of experienced and skilled fostering social workers. Both the Adoption Grant and PSA pump priming money is being used to increase capacity to recruit, assess, prepare, train and supervise carers.

3.3 The strategy to improve the retention of carers is fourfold; to improve the level of support and training; to increase allowances and fees to reflect the demands of the fostering task; to improve placement support services such as respite care, holiday activities, advice and support including out of hours, access to health services including counselling, access to schools and so on; and to develop social, thank you and celebratory events. Again, the Service has set aside a specific budget in 2003/04 to establish a calendar of events to recognise the contribution of foster carers. The overarching approach to retention is partnership working based on respect, trust and good communication.

### **4. Summary and Recommendation**

4.1 The Service is on target to recruit 30 new foster carers in 2003/04, representing over 15% of the current pool of carers. This target incorporates all types of carers, assessed and approved under fostering service standards and regulations, able to meet the needs of children looked after by the Council and thereby helping to avoid residential care and placement with IFAs. The target is stretching for the Service due to the introduction of higher national standards for the assessment, preparation, training, supervision and review of carers, and the recruitment and retention of suitably experienced and qualified staff to carry out this role. A target has been set in the Service Business Plan to reduce the number of resignations due to dissatisfaction with any element of the retention strategy described above (3.3). It would not be appropriate to set a target in respect of retirements, resignations for wider personal reasons or terminations due to standards of care issues.

4.2 It is recommended that the current target for the recruitment of new foster carers is in line with the Council commitment to best value and with the service strategy to improve placement choice for looked after children. The target is also consistent with the need to compensate for natural wastage, as well as the known and predicted demand for placements.

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