

Report to: Corporate Parenting Panel

Date: 28th July 2017

By: Director of Children's Services

Title of report: Annual Progress Report of East Sussex Fostering Service
1 April 2016 – 31 March 2017

Purpose of report: To outline the performance of the Fostering Service between
1 April 2016 – 31 March 2017

RECOMMENDATION:

The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the contents of the report

1 Financial appraisal

1.1 Services to LAC are supported by base budgets within Children's Services. There are no increased costs arising from this report.

2 Supporting information

2.1 The Annual Progress report of the East Sussex Fostering Service is attached as Appendix 1.

3 Recommendation

3.1 The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the contents of the report.

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Local Members:

All

Background documentation:

None

1. Safeguarding

1.1 This outcome is fundamental to the delivery of fostering services across East Sussex and is embedded in each of the core functions which are addressed fully throughout the report. The core functions are as listed:

- Recruitment and retention
- Assessment
- Supervision and review
- Foster carer training
- The matching and placing of children and young people with foster carers

2. Recruitment and Retention of Carers

2.1 2016/2017 has been another challenging year for the recruitment of foster carers. East Sussex County Council (ESCC) experiences are consistent with those of both our neighbouring authorities and of Fostering Services nationally, who have all reported similar challenges. There appears to be a number of different reasons for this. Some applicants continue to be concerned about the implications of allegations. Previous high success rates in ESCC's recruitment of foster carers have, to some extent, exhausted the existing pool of carers. The number of foster carers transferring from agencies has also decreased this year. Those carers who initially agreed to transfer due to lack of placements and support from their own agencies have then been persuaded to remain with their own agencies by being offered financial incentives. In addition, the successful reduction in the use of agency placements has resulted in fewer carers looking after East Sussex children who are available for transfer. There are also some agency carers wishing to transfer who have not always meet the quality standards of ESCC Fostering Service.

2.2 As with last year, the recruitment and retention team have continued to achieve their timescale targets for assessments of 6 – 8 months (dependent on the complexity of the assessment). In order to attain the expedient and efficient transfer of carers from other agencies, the recruitment and assessment team continue to use an abridged assessment tool, optimising the existing statutory information from the foster carers' previous agency. This has allowed the Fostering Service to approve transferring carers within a maximum of 3 months of their initial enquiry.

2.3 From 1 April 2016 – 31 March 2017, 411 new enquiries were received which led to 182 screening calls and 76 initial visits to prospective foster carers. This year the Fostering Service has introduced a text enquiry service where applicants can text, phone, email, or complete a web form to enquire about the service. These methods maximise enquiries at weekends and out of office hours.

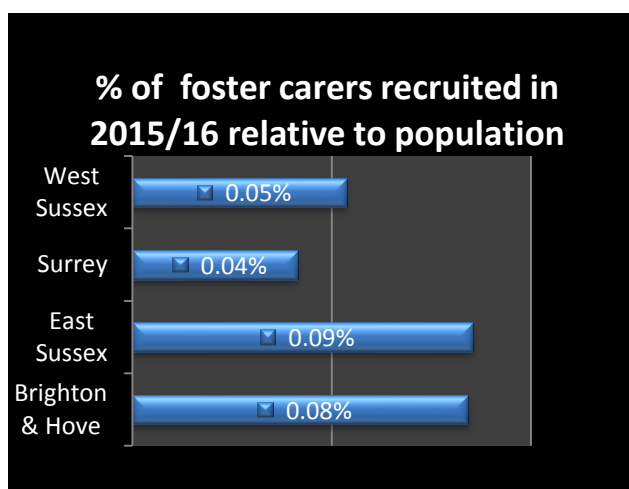
2.4 There were 6 'Skills to Foster' pre-assessment preparation courses held during 2016/17 and 28 households attended these courses. During the assessment process, the Children in Care Council (CICC) continued to play an active role by holding informal interviews with applicants and providing feedback for the assessment report.

2.5 There were 21 households offering 50 placements approved in 2016/17 compared with 26 households in 2015/16 offering 44 placements. 3 of these households were transfers from independent fostering providers and 1 of these households had an East Sussex looked after child placed. The reasons why 17 further assessments did not progress to Stage 2 (presentation to the Fostering Panel) were as follows:-

- 3 agency carers chose to remain with their agency after being offered "incentives "
- 9 cases were due to changes in personal circumstances that could not have been predicted earlier

- 5 cases were closed by the Fostering Service due to issues at Stage
- There were 6 fostering assessments still in progress at 31 March 2017.

2.6 ESCC Fostering Service performs better in relation to our immediate neighbouring authorities in recruitment activity. This is based on the Ofsted Dataset returns of 2015/16. This is the first year Ofsted have released this information.



East Sussex Fostering Service still performs slightly better than the national average for the retention of its foster carers.

2016/17	ESCC	Nationally
Loss of foster carers	8%	12%
Average length of service of carers	7.34 years	7.8 years

The breakdown of reasons that carers have given for leaving ESCC during 2016/17 were as follows-

- Adoption of foster children
- Termination of approval
- Retirement

Given that ESCC continues to have a high percentage of foster carers over 55 years of age, it is anticipated that there will be an increasing number of foster carers retiring. This local trend reflects a wider national demographic trend.

2.7 The Fostering Service continues to employ the marketing strategy of 'continual presence'. This consists of wide-ranging extensive advertising throughout the year using a range of different mediums. The Fostering Service marketing strategy for 2016/17 has focussed on 'You can be a foster carer in 6 months' and 'Don't keep our children waiting'.

Below are some examples of mediums used to recruit foster carers:

- Radio advertising - Heart FM
- Monthly newspaper advertising – county wide in all areas of East Sussex and on the borders of Kent, West Sussex and Brighton
- Lamppost banners
- Football hoarding advertising – Lewes, Eastbourne and Hastings
- Roundabout advertising – 2 in Eastbourne and 1 in Hastings
- Car park tickets – Eastbourne, Hastings, Lewes, Seaford and Newhaven
- Bus stops – Eastbourne and Hastings

- Net Natives – interruption advertising
- Advertising on the Amey courier vans
- Display vans in both Hastings and Eastbourne
- ‘Your County’ magazine – delivered to every household in East Sussex
- Editorial in East Sussex Herald & Hastings Observer – January 2017
- Magnet Magazine
- ESCC payslips
- Twitter
- Facebook

Recruitment Events

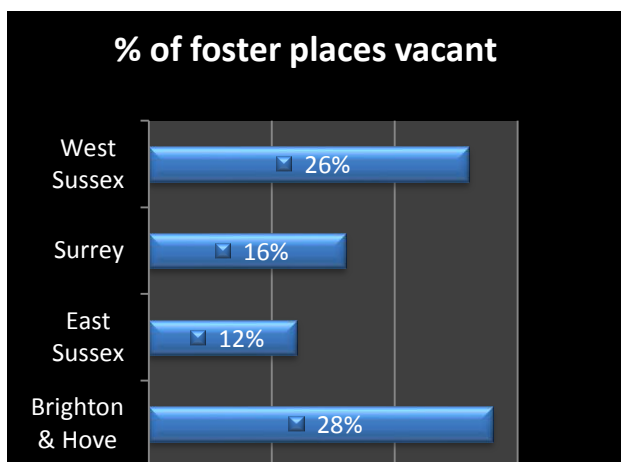
- The Fostering Service has facilitated a number of information events in different locations to ensure a high profile across the county. Information evenings have been held on a monthly basis in Eastbourne, Hastings and Uckfield. The service also facilitated 3 further information evenings in Eastbourne, Lewes and Hastings giving information about the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children requiring placements in East Sussex. The Fostering Service also attended and gave out information at Volunteer Fairs in Peacehaven, Uckfield and at 2 staff conferences.

Retention Events

- In May 2016, an evening event was held at Barnsgate Manor to say “Thank You” to our foster carers. This was attended by 120 carers and staff.
- In August 2016, all foster carers and their families caring for East Sussex children were invited to a picnic at Knockhatch. Both children’s social workers and supervising social workers attended. Agency foster carers were also invited to give them the opportunity to meet ESCC foster carers and staff, and to find out more about our service.
- In October 2016, the children of our foster carers were invited to an activity day at ‘Branching Out’ in celebration of ‘Fostering Network’s Sons and Daughters week’.

2.8 Percentage of foster care vacancies

The % of foster care vacancies is indicative of a service’s ability to match and effectively manage its foster carer’s resources. ESCC Fostering Service had only 12% foster care vacancies as outlined in the Ofsted data set in 2015/16 as compared to higher numbers in neighbouring authorities. The more recent Ofsted 2016/17 returns would indicate a similar percentage of healthy operational vacancies within ESCC Fostering Service.



Foster Care Training and support

3.1 From 1st April 2016 to the 31st March 2017, 796 training places have been taken up by foster carers (as compared to last year’s equivalent of 589), evidencing a substantial increase in attendance.. Overall, the evaluations of the courses by participants were rated as

excellent, although there has been a reduction of evaluations being completed since the introduction of the East Sussex Learning Portal.

3.2 New courses introduced this year have included:

- Fostering changes, under 12's, addressing behaviour management strategies
- Introduction to child sexual abuse
- Managing children with sexually harmful behaviours
- Caring for asylum seeking, refugee and unaccompanied children
- Supporting education and success, a practical approach for primary aged children
- Supporting education and success, a practical approach for secondary aged children
- Internet safety: fostering in a digital world - 13 years old and over
- Internet safety: fostering in a digital world - under 12 year olds

3.3 Given the varied expertise, knowledge and skill base of our foster carers, a number of courses have successfully been delivered by experienced foster carers. The new courses so far delivered by foster carer trainers are:

- Parenting traumatised children
- Practical skills to help children protect themselves
- Understanding self-harm
- Caring for children with additional needs
- Using visuals to help communication
- Supporting new carers workshops
- Creative ideas for digital photo albums

These courses have received excellent feedback. Foster carers have identified the value of having experienced carers who understand the fostering task delivering specific expertise training. This model of delivery also provides a more cost effective way to upskill those foster carers that need further training. To ensure the quality of training, there is an agreed framework of requirements and support identified with opportunities for continual professional development. 16 foster carers are undertaking a variety of qualifications. These include the level 3 diploma children and young people's workforce qualification, and Level 3 and 4 in training and education. There are also 5 dedicated foster carers involved in the delivery and assessment of the children and young people's qualification.

3.4 Planned courses for 2017/18 include (in conjunction with the Virtual School):

- Mental health first aid
- Supporting Thrive in education
- Supporting young people where English is not their first language.

3.5 Other courses that Foster Carers / Supervising Social Workers are being trained to deliver are:

- An introduction to Non-violent resistance
- An introduction to Theraplay
- Understanding sensory attachment
- Understanding the angry child
- The impact of childhood experiences on mind, body and brain

To support the reduced training budget, identified training will be actively promoted to other agencies for income generation opportunities.

4 Foster carer support and supervision

4.1 The Fostering Service currently has 292 fostering households that provide a range of placements for children and young people including parent and baby placements. Supervision and contact plans are assessed on the complexity of the children placed, taking into account the needs of the foster carers and their families. The pressures and demands over the last year on foster carers and supervising social workers (SSW's) have increased, but the quality of the support provided has remained of a high standard.

4.2 Support groups are available to provide foster carers with opportunities to meet with other carers, to increase support networks and to give the opportunity for shared learning. There are four localised groups in Uckfield, Rotherfield, Eastbourne and Newhaven. There are also three themed support groups: a parent and child foster carers' support group; a support group for carers of adolescents and a 'men who foster' support group. In recognition of the growing demands on foster carers and the increased complex needs of the children placed with carers, a "Buddy" system was launched in April 2017. Nationally, research evidences that peer support for foster carers is very successful. There are a number of 'Buddy' systems around the country which focus on the support of carers in relation to moving children on, coping with allegations and childcare and support. There is no doubt that foster carers receive a different kind of support knowing that they are talking to a colleague who has often experienced the same issues as they have.

4.3 Further support is provided for foster carers through the fostering advice line - an out of hours service, available to all foster carers and supported lodgings providers for 365 days per year. This service is staffed by a team of 7 workers from the Fostering Service, working on a rota basis, to provide support and advice to all foster carers. The service deals with a range of issues such as placement disruption, children and young people missing from placement, police involvement or generally supporting carers in managing challenging behaviours presented by our children or young people. The fostering advice line received 297 contacts from foster carers seeking support or advice during 2016/17.

4.4 There continue to be close working relationships with Looked After Children(LAC) teams, The Child and Adolescent Mental Health service (CAMHS), The Virtual School and Placement Support Services(PSS); all of which are invaluable in supporting foster carers in sustaining placements and endeavouring to meet the children and young people's needs.

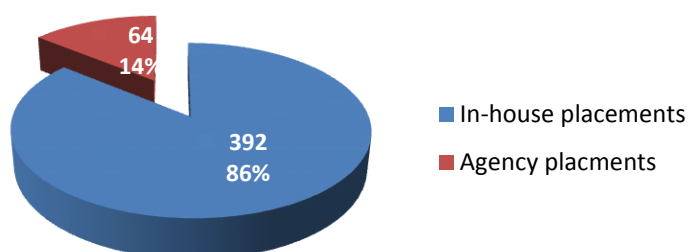
5 Health

5.1 Meeting the health needs of LAC remains a high priority for the Fostering Service. Foster carers continue to prioritise the health needs of their children with supervising social workers monitoring foster carers contribution to timely health assessments. There have been a number of training courses available which can be accessed by foster carers to focus on the health needs of young people. These include: autism, self-harm, first aid and healthy living.

6 Placement Activity

6.1 On 31st March 2017 there were 456 children in foster care. 392 of these children were placed with in-house placements. This includes in-house 'parent and child' placements, children subject to special guardianship orders placed with foster carers and those older young people remaining in their "staying put" fostering placements through to independence. The number of East Sussex LAC placed with agency foster carers has decreased from 77 children in 2015/16 to 64 at the end of March 2017.

Placement Activity 2016/17



The above figures illustrate that 86% of young people were looked after by in-house foster carers which is an increase of 4% from the previous year.

6.2 As of 31st March 2017, 25 young people (over 18 years of age) remain with their foster carers under 'Staying Put' arrangements. There are also 26 children who are currently subject to special guardianship orders placed with East Sussex foster carer and there has been 1 adoption order granted to an East Sussex foster carer during 2016/17.

6.3 Of the 506 referrals received between 1st April 2016 and 31st March 2017, 441 resulted in placements being made or matched. Of the 506 referrals, 65 were ultimately not required. On 31st March 2017 there were an additional 23 active referrals waiting to be matched with foster carers. These figures represent a slight increase in the number of matches and placements made as compared to last year. This is a significant workload for a small duty team who may also be seeking residential placements for some of our children.

7 The Supported Lodgings Team

7.1 East Sussex's supported lodgings provision continues to be an invaluable resource for LAC, care leavers and homeless young people. As in the previous year, the service has seen an increase of young people with very complex needs being accommodated within the service. A few young people have been able to step-down from therapeutic residential environments to supported lodgings providers. This has in part been due to the support and training on offer to providers and the increased approval of 6 providers being dual registered as foster carers and supportive lodging providers. During the last year, supported lodgings providers have provided a number of placements for children from in-house residential placements as well as from costly external agency placements. This has achieved a saving of £419,000. This vital step-down provision has not only made a valuable contribution to budgetary savings but has also been in young people's best interests, supporting them on the path to independence.

7.2 As of March 2017 there were 34 supported lodgings households providing a total of 50 placements across the county. This has given the service a net gain of 2 households and one placement as a result of 5 resignations and 7 new approvals.

7.3 In the period 1st April 2016 – 31st March 2017 the Supported Lodgings Team received 107 referrals requesting placement for young people of which 21 were for LAC placed in foster care, 41 were for care leavers and 45 were in respect of homeless young people. Of the 107 referrals received 19 were ultimately not required.

7.4 Flexibility of providers and their ability to accommodate a range of young people with different needs remains one of the primary objectives of the service. A priority for 2017/18 is to recruit a broader range of supportive lodgings providers. A new recruitment campaign is currently being launched.

8 User Participation

8.1 The Children in Care Council (CICC) continues to go from strength to strength. A new group was formed during 2016 comprising of 17 young people. All members are working on accredited courses such as Asdan, Youth Voice, Arts Award, First Aid Training, Food Hygiene, and Leadership.

8.2 The CICC attended 31 holiday activities, giving 98 young people the opportunity to raise issues about being in care and helping 45 young people to resolve their own individual issues.

8.3 CICC members have also participated in 80 opportunities to promote their work both locally and nationally. Examples below include:

- Production of a short film 'This is Us'. CICC members have been holding assemblies in their own schools to encourage discussions of, and reducing the stereotypes about being in care
- Meeting with the Children's Commissioner about separating siblings
- Attendance at the All Party Parliamentary Group to hear about The Family and Social Work Act and how ESCC could improve outcomes for looked after children in Personal Health Social Emotional lessons and apprenticeships
- Involvement nationally with Social Care Institute for Excellence in a national mental health project
- Holding local consultations, with CAMHS, CGL (Change Grow Live Advocacy Service) and LAC Nurses
 - Regularly attendance at foster carer's preparation groups and recruitment panels for staff
 - Shadowing of the Chief Executive Officer for the NSPCC for national takeover day. This was a very exciting opportunity in which the CICC joined a web chat with 50 other people and attended a meeting inside Buckingham Palace.
 - Generating income of £2700 to enable young people to attend courses and a summer prom
 - Design of new Pledge leaflets and a contact card
 - Production of a very successful Christmas newsletter that was sent to all ESCC young people in care aged 8.
 - Attendance at the Corporate Parenting Panel to update members on their work progress

9 Working in Partnership with East Sussex Foster Care Association (ESFCA)

9.1 The Operations Manager attends the monthly evening meetings of the ESFCA management group to report on the developments of the East Sussex Fostering Service and on Children's Services more generally. During 2016/17 ESFCA elected a new chair and new trustees and agreed an ambitious agenda to support East Sussex County Council's foster carers, which has been very helpful to our LAC. They have also continued to provide support to foster carers who have raised concerns at the surgeries held in conjunction with both the Fostering and LAC Operational Managers.

10 The Placement Support Service (PSS)

10.1 The PSS is currently supporting 98 children in placement. During 2016-2017, 28 new pieces of work were commissioned including 6 pieces of life story work. The PSS also responded to 85 emergency or crisis requests from carers that resulted in 101 days support. The use of placement support is vital in sustaining extremely challenging placements, which would most likely, in the absence of this service, require alternative and more costly agency placements.

10.2 PSS staff are increasingly being asked to provide additional support to young people who are unable to sustain their school placement thus creating additional pressures on foster carers. This additional direct work is funded by the Virtual School. Income of £2,700 was generated by the service from grant applications to fund various activities and training for young people.

10.3 Despite some financial challenges the PSS has continued to provide some holiday and weekend group activities to LAC aged 5 to 17. All activities have an educational element and cover sport, art, environment or national curriculum. During the year:

- 41 group holiday activities were provided
- PSS worked with 110 young people
- 461 places were offered to children and young people
- 10 to 15 young people attend on average each activity

The feedback of 98% of young people who evaluated their activities ranged between good and excellent. The Fostering Service's partnership with St Bede's has continued, allowing our young people to access sports facilities and their swimming pool free of charge. The PSS has also been able to negotiate free tickets to a few of Brighton and Hove Albion football matches for our LAC.

10.4 A successful summer prom was held in June at the request of the CICC and other young people. This was jointly funded by the department and by income generated by the CICC. 120 young people and their carers attended the event. Feedback from young people included:

'Everyone dressed to impress and looked absolutely amazing'
'We danced all night as well as taking an insane amount of photos in the photo booth to help maintain long lasting memories'
'It was an incredible experience; I can't wait for the next one'
'The prom also gave the young people an opportunity to have fun with old friends as well as make new friendships'
'We felt really special celebrating - well 'just us'

10.5 Foster carers value PSS support and holiday activities highly as illustrated by the comments extracted from annual evaluations:

'We are more than just foster carers; placement support gives us time to be 'us'
'We get valuable time for ourselves; placement support is a great benefit to this young man'
'Over the years placement support has given us valuable time to simply re-charge for a while'
'It is difficult to say if we would have survived without placement support'
'Placement support is so important for my family to continue fostering'
'It has been invaluable to have placement support when young people are challenging'
'Gives my young person time out and builds their confidence'
'I would like to pass on my thanks to the placement support service for supporting my young person and carrying on my strategies'
'Without PSS I could not have offered the young person a placement for the 7 weeks she was here'

11 Summary

11.1 The Fostering Service continues to be highly effective but primary challenge of the service continues to be the recruitment and retention of foster carers. As outlined earlier in the report, in relation to population size, ESCC's Fostering Service remains proportionally the lead authority regionally in the recruitment and retention of foster carers as compared to our 4 neighbouring authorities. The recruitment strategy for 2016/17 focused on the transfer of suitable carers from independent agencies, especially for those carers who had East Sussex LAC placed with them. However, the tactics employed by agencies have served to thwart this plan with most carers initially wanting to transfer subsequently remaining with their agencies following the offer of increased enhancements. For 2017/18 the service will persevere with the transfer of suitable carers where possible, as well as continuing robust and energetic recruitment of a range of new foster carers.

The Key Management Priorities for 2017/2018 include:

- To continue the provision of high quality training and support for our foster carers so that stability for children is prioritised.
- To continue with an extensive recruitment strategy throughout the year to attract potential foster carers to come to East Sussex as the preferred fostering agency in this area. This will include targeted recruitment on the borders of East Sussex in order to recruit foster carers that (potentially) the Fostering Service could make available to our neighbouring authorities should there be a surplus.
- To recruit a wider pool of supportive lodgings providers to ensure more housing options are available for vulnerable homeless16 and 17 year olds and for our care leavers.

Adrian Sewell - **Operation Manager Fostering Service**