

## **REPORT TO THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLICY AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

**DATE OF MEETING: 24<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2017**

**SUBJECT OF REPORT: NORTH SOMERSET FOSTERING STRATEGY**

**TOWN OR PARISH: NORTH SOMERSET**

**OFFICER/MEMBER PRESENTING: AMANDA BRAUND, SERVICE LEADER RESOURCE SERVICE, PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES**

**KEY DECISION: NO**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- That the Panel includes monitoring the progress of the fostering strategy implementation within their work plan.
- That council officers review the fostering strategy quarterly, with a formal written review to Panel in November 2017, following the first year of implementation.

### **1. SUMMARY OF REPORT**

The North Somerset fostering strategy 2016-18 has been completed (attached as Appendix 1) and currently is being implemented within the fostering service. The fostering strategy sets out clearly the key goals and targets for the fostering service over the next two years and how these will be achieved through the implementation of key actions within the fostering strategy. The key objectives of the fostering strategy are as follows:-

- Getting the basics right –ensuring the fostering service remains compliant with its statutory duty and the national minimum standards for fostering.
- Increased recruitment of foster carers and specialist foster carers/supported lodgings hosts to meet the needs of our looked after children and to enable a greater proportion of our looked after children to be placed in house. Including increased partnerships with existing foster carers to be our recruitment ambassadors.
- Increased diversity in the foster carer population so that our fostering population grows to meet the increasingly diverse needs of our looked after children.
- Increasing the population of foster carers and their skills base to care for the needs of our adolescent children and young people.
- Enhance the skills base of our existing and newly recruited foster carers to move towards a therapeutic parenting approach to improve the mental health and emotional well-being of our looked after children.
- To improve permanency arrangements for our looked after children by reducing the proportion of foster placements which are disrupted or end through breakdown.

- Review and ensure there is in place a competitive support package for our carers including appropriate practical, emotional and financial support and re-numeration to ensure we are competitive against other fostering agencies recruiting foster carers.
- Create stronger links with the foster carer association and our foster carer population to increase foster carer participation and feedback in the delivery of the fostering service.
- Increasing links with the children in care council and the children's rights officer to ensure the voice of our children and young people are also key to the delivery of the fostering service.
- To ensure there is robust out of hours fostering provision in place in the event a child or young person needs to be accommodated outside of normal working hours.
- To improve independence and transition for our looked after children including a review of the current staying put policy.

## **2. POLICY**

The Fostering strategy is the key document that underpins this piece of work. Other supporting documents are:-

- Resource Service Plan
- Mental Health strategy for Children Looked After
- High Standards for Social work in North Somerset

## **3. DETAILS**

Within North Somerset it is our ambition that all of our Children Looked After will be placed within safe, stable and loving foster families where they can thrive and maximise their potential. The North Somerset fostering strategy sets out North Somerset's two year strategic plan outlining how this will be achieved focusing on the areas of:-

- Foster carer recruitment and assessment
- Foster carer retention and support
- Placement stability
- Foster carer knowledge and skills
- Diversity of Foster Placements, Supporting Lodgings and Respite Carers
- Support for the mental health and emotional well-being of our Children Looked After and our foster carers

It is evident from analysis of current data in respect of our Children Looked After and foster carer population that we do not at this time have a sufficient or diverse enough pool of foster carers to meet the current and increasing demand. This means that currently it is challenging to ensure good placement matching for our Children Looked After which can be a contributory factor in placement disruption and breakdown.

In particular we have a deficiency of main stream foster carers, BME carers, adolescent placements, placements for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, emergency foster care placements and placements for sibling groups. Our data suggests that our Children Looked After are more likely to reach permanence and stability through in house placement provision rather than provision through independent sector provision. Placing children with in house carers also means children are more likely to be placed within the North Somerset Boundary, closer to their family, friends and local connections which is likely to increase their emotional

well-being, sense of identity and belonging and mean we are more able to locally support children and young people both within our care and when they leave our care.

Although we recognise the independent sector adds a valuable resource to ensure a mixed foster placement economy our strategy is focused on the increase and promotion of in house foster carers for the reasons outlined above. Currently we have set an ambitious target of recruiting 20 in house carers/supporting lodgings hosts per year, this will be reviewed in September 2017.

Nationally there has been an increased demand for placements for Children Looked After which has increased in line with the higher rate of care proceedings issued by Local Authorities. This has in turn placed additional demands on foster placements on a national scale, and within North Somerset. This has resulted in an increasing reliance in using Independent Sector Placements to care for our Children Looked After due to our in house foster care provision struggling to meet this demand. We have found difficulties in accessing independent foster placements within or close to North Somerset meaning more of our children are being placed out of county which is an issue that is also reflected within the national picture of placements for Children Looked After. This national increase has meant not only an increased demand on our use of our in house placements, but a national demand on the use of independent sector foster placements. This has led to less placement choice for our children looked after both locally and within the independent sector which has meant it has been more difficult to find good placement matches for children, within the North Somerset Boundary in a timely manner.

Within North Somerset our data also has shown us that on average our looked after children have a higher than the national average SDQ\* score and at times our placement breakdown rates have been higher than that of the national average. We know from our data that foster placements appear most likely to break down when children reach adolescence and their behaviour becomes more challenging.

The fostering strategy therefore seeks to address the current key issues and gaps in our fostering provision for our looked after children. Namely to increase the proportion, diversity and skills base of foster carers within North Somerset and to provide our foster carers with a competitive support package. Furthermore to enhance the support to foster carers and our children looked after receive. Finally to promote the emotional and mental health of our looked after children and to secure emotional permanency through long term stable foster placements that meet their needs and promote their outcomes positively.

\*Strengths and difficulties Questionnaire- a measure of the mental health of children and young people, completed annually for looked after children.

#### **4. CONSULTATION**

The following have been consulted regarding the fostering strategy:-

- Foster Carers Scrutiny Working Group
- Assistant Director Eifion Price
- SAST
- Fostering Team
- Foster Carers Association

## **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The fostering strategy contributes to the appropriate use of North Somerset's financial resources by ensuring that we are using our council resources efficiently to ensure the best outcomes for our looked after children. We know from our data that our looked after children have better outcome when placed with our in house foster carers and our in house foster carer service provides better value for money than placing children with independent providers, which often result in our children being placed out of local authority area. Therefore it is in the interest of our looked after children to increase, support and where appropriate invest within our in house fostering provision and to decrease reliance on the independent sector. This also ensures the most effective use of North Somerset's financial resources ensuring financial sustainability in the longer term.

The social impact bond, which comes into effect on the 24<sup>th</sup> April will complement the aims of the fostering strategy by enabling more children to remain within their families through intensive work and targeted intervention.

## **6. RISK MANAGEMENT**

The potential risks to achieving the aims and objectives within the fostering strategy are as follows:-

### Increased National foster carer recruitment activity

The national picture currently shows there are a shortage of foster care placements and a shortage of foster carers. Recruitment of foster carers is a competitive market due to the national need for more foster placements, increased presence of independent fostering agencies and increased recruitment activity by these agencies and local authorities. To mitigate against the risks of recruitment targets not being met the fostering strategy focuses on the importance of dedicated recruitment staff, partnerships with our foster carers within recruitment and targeted recruitment campaigns to maximise our recruitment resources and impact.

### Staffing Considerations

Currently the fostering service have vacancies within the recruitment team. The risk this poses is a capacity issue which may mean we are unable to focus on recruitment activity to the degree we would wish to, putting our recruitment targets at risk. These vacancies are currently being advertised and the use of interim staffing, funded by current vacant posts will be considered if recruitment is unsuccessful.

### Increase in children in care population

The national picture has shown a year on year increase in the numbers of children coming into the care system, over the past 5 years. There is a risk that even with increased recruitment of foster carers if the children in care population continues to rise there will still be a significant shortfall in the number of foster placements available to meet the needs of children coming into care. It is anticipated that this risk will be mitigated by the Social Impact Bond, coming into effect on the 24<sup>th</sup> April which aims to reduce safely the current children in care population within North Somerset.

## **7. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

There are no assessed equality impact risks to the local community through the implementation of the fostering strategy.

## **8. CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS**

The fostering strategy underpins the way in which North Somerset will exercise its corporate parenting responsibilities in respect of the accommodation and care that our children looked after will receive. Therefore there are corporate implications in respect of the importance of being a 'good' corporate parent to our children who are looked after and reputational risk for North Somerset within this if this duty is not discharged appropriately to our children and young people.

## **9. OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

The fostering strategy has been drafted to detail key objectives that need to be delivered to ensure the needs of children looked after within North Somerset are met and to ensure the corporate parenting responsibilities to our looked after children are successfully discharged. The key strategy goals have been derived from appraising the data available regarding our looked after children and our foster carers and analysing the most effective and efficient interventions to improve foster carer recruitment and retention, and to improve the mental health and transition arrangements for our looked after children. The strategy also outlines the support that will be provided to North Somerset foster carers to ensure due care is provided to those caring for our children. It is anticipated that the strategy will remain a live document throughout its implementation and will be subject to regular update and review.

## **AUTHOR**

Amanda Braund  
Service Leader Resource Service  
People and Communities  
North Somerset Council  
Post Point 22, Town Hall  
Weston-super-Mare BS23 1UJ

**Tel:** 01275 882151 (Ext 2151)

**Mobi:** 07919546425

## **APPENDICES**

Appendix 1 - North Somerset Fostering Strategy 2016-2018

Appendix 2 – Strategic Plan