

From: Peter Oakford, Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services
Andrew Ireland, Corporate Director of Social Care, Health and Wellbeing

To: Corporate Parenting Panel – 23 September 2016

Subject: **FOSTERING SERVICE INDEPENDENT REVIEW**

Classification: Unrestricted

Electoral Division: All

Summary: The Independent Fostering Review was requested by the Corporate Parenting Select Committee in February 2016 to ensure that the standard of foster care provision is safe and adequately meets the needs of Looked After Children in the care of Kent foster carers.

The report considers the Kent Fostering Service and the standard of service delivery in the county. The review was conducted by independent practice leads Sally Pillay and Sania Khan, who were part of the Tri Borough Team, which achieved an outstanding Ofsted grade for fostering and adoption services. The review was to support learning from outstanding practitioners and create opportunities for Kent to develop its fostering services. The full report is attached as Appendix 1.

The fostering review considered all areas of fostering practice, including the recruitment and assessment of foster carers, which was considered good; area support fostering teams and their supervision of foster carers, which requires improvement; the management of duty systems and the matching of children to their placements, which reflect inconsistencies across the county. Feedback was sought from the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service, Virtual School Kent (VSK), Kent Foster Care Association (KFCA), fostering social workers, foster carers and also from children and young people, who were very impressive.

The key areas for improvement have been incorporated into a Fostering Service Business Plan, attached as Appendix 2, and this has been shared across all the services and teams to support service developments.

Required Outcomes

The Fostering Service, led by the Head of Service for Fostering, will ensure there is progress on the areas identified for improvement in the Fostering Service Business Plan. Key areas identified in the review include fostering team managers having greater oversight of practice and this to be evidenced through supervision. The management of allegations against foster carers requires improved recording of decision making, to evidence timescales and outcomes. The review identified that there were efficiencies to be made in the panel processes, for DBS checks, where there was delay in their receipt, and also to reduce bureaucracy in the length of reports for permanency matching and Connected Person foster carers assessments. *(Connected Persons are family/friends who are assessed to be carers specifically for*

a child placed by the Local Authority.) These changes will be led by the Head of Fostering and supported by the area teams. The service should also ensure that staff participate in the development of policies, particularly that they contribute to the sufficiency and recruitment strategy.

Recommendation(s): Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel are asked to **CONSIDER** the contents of the Fostering Review and **ENDORSE** the Fostering Service Business Plan.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The review of the Specialist Children's Services Fostering Service was undertaken by external reviewers at the request of the Assistant Director, Corporate Parenting.
- 1.2 The Fostering Service provides care for children and young people covering a vast geographical area and offers a variety of placement options, including temporary, permanent and respite care, depending on the needs and circumstances of the child or young person. The service is also responsible for recruiting, assessing, supporting and delivering duty services to all foster carers and connected person's carers.
- 1.3 The focus of the review, as agreed with the Assistant Director, was undertaken over a three day period and covered the following key areas:
 - Recruitment and Assessment of Foster Carers
 - Duty, Supervision and Support to Foster Carers
 - Quality Assurance
 - Workforce Development
- 1.4 The review was undertaken by two independent practitioners who had led the Tri-Borough in achieving an Ofsted grade of Outstanding in fostering and adoption services in 2016. The Council's Fostering Service hoped to gain from the knowledge and expertise of practitioners who had been through an Ofsted and had achieved excellence. The reviewers were thorough in their assessment of the work the Fostering Service undertake across Kent and were able to provide practice guidance to staff and managers, increasing their understanding of the need to evidence their decision making, management oversight and ensuring purposeful recording. They were able to visit teams and meet with staff across the service. The reviewers considered a number of documents, including the sufficiency and recruitment strategy, training and development programme, annual reviews of foster carers and a number of case files, including information on 100 case audits.

2. Body of the report

- 2.1 Recruitment and assessment of foster carers was assessed. This was an area that the reviewers believed to be good and evidenced clarity of purpose with timeliness of intervention. The recruitment strategy is comprehensive and effective as the performance data reflects that there is a steady flow of new carers approved by the team throughout the year.

- 2.2 The programme of supervision and signs of safety training that is on offer will further develop the routine supervision to be more reflective and analytical.
- 2.3 There are monthly support team meetings which the assessment team members attend and share information about placement needs. This is good practice and supports understanding placement needs and sufficiency. The placements duty team captures good qualitative data on the sufficiency of placements and this informs the sufficiency strategy; however, this information should be shared with staff so they are involved in the development of the sufficiency strategy. Staff should be aware of the information and the process by which the sufficiency strategy is prepared. Staff commented that they did not feel involved enough in the building or contributing to the overall recruitment or sufficiency strategy.
- 2.4 The review team was able to observe the fostering duty process within two teams. The identified area for development is to review the consistency of duty across the service. This is to ensure that decision making and matching information for placements is available and up to date and every team follows the same duty processes.
- 2.5 Feedback from foster carers was mainly positive. The focus group was attended by a range of carers with different levels of fostering and life experience. Most of the foster carers rated their support as good. They said that social workers were experienced, flexible and easy to talk with. There does need to be a focus on newly-approved carers to ensure they receive the support they require and in supporting foster carers to express dissatisfaction or complain if necessary. Foster carers appreciate the training on offer and would like more information on the new finance system. Overall, the foster carers are an asset to the Council and believe they are part of a good service that benefits children.
- 2.6 The significant area for focus and improvement in the Fostering Service is management oversight and supervision. This must be evidenced on files to ensure that there is clear direction on the practice and social workers are supported in their role and responsibilities. A quality assurance framework and regular auditing of cases is now in place and is leading to significant practice improvements.
- 2.7 Feedback from children and young people was welcomed and it was reassuring that the issues of placement stability and delegated authority were already being addressed by the service. This had been identified as an area for Children in Care teams to focus on with fostering team colleagues. The completion of the delegated authority is required as part of all new placements made and the paperwork in Liberi is being reviewed and updated to support the social work practice.

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 The reviewers collated evidence of social work practice for fostering across the Council. This included reviewing case files to consider the standard of social work practice, observe fostering panels and discuss with staff their work. They also met and talked to children and young people and to foster carers.

- 3.2 In addition, the reviewers were keen to understand that the Fostering Service knew how well it was performing and was clear about what needed to change to drive forward performance improvement.
- 3.3 In the view of the reviewers, the Council is not currently delivering the requirements of a good Fostering Service. In considering the grade, the reviewers judged the Authority to be one that requires improvement - measured through the Ofsted criteria.
- 3.4 It should be noted that there are no widespread or serious failures that create or leave children at risk of being harmed. The welfare of Looked After Children is safeguarded and promoted. Minimum requirements are in place. It should also be noted that there are areas of excellent practice within recruitment and assessment, in the support from VSK and KFCA, which are all areas that can be built on and where experienced staff can disseminate good practice and promote a learning culture within the wider fostering service.
- 3.5 The reviewers noted that Kent is a vast county and could develop its potential by building on its community of foster carers. The Fostering Service is ideally placed to challenge the Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) sector that is very active within its boundaries as well as implement a creative and very innovative model of foster care services. This will be led by the newly appointed Head of Fostering.

4. Recommendations

- 4.1 **Recommendation(s):** Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel are asked to **CONSIDER** the contents of the Fostering Review and **ENDORSE** the Fostering Service Business Plan.

5. Background Documents

None

6. Author details

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