

Wiltshire Council

Children's Select Committee

10 March 2020

Fostering Excellence - the development of Wiltshire Council's Fostering Service

Purpose of report

1. This report indicates progress to date of the Fostering Excellence development project within Wiltshire Council, and indicating next steps.
2. The issues to be addressed through the project are:
 - Increase initial enquiries and therefore assessments and approvals of Wiltshire Council foster carers;
 - Improve the retention of Wiltshire approved foster carers;
 - Increase the number of children cared for by our foster carers (currently 46%);
 - Maintain high occupancy rates of Wiltshire approved foster carers (currently 80%+).

Background

3. It is priority for Wiltshire Council to ensure that 60-70% of our children in care are living with Wiltshire approved foster carers, reducing the number who live with Independent Fostering Agency foster carers and making sure that children and young people can remain at their schools, colleges and living in their home communities where it is right and safe for them to do so.
4. To do this, we need to recruit a net gain of about 60 fostering households over the next three years, representing an overall increase to approximately 200 households.
5. Wiltshire Council Fostering Service must not only be competitive with neighbouring local authorities but also with the Independent Fostering Agencies that operate within the area.
6. We need to be the "agency of choice" for people who are thinking of becoming foster carers and to do this we need an excellent response service to first enquiries arising from innovative recruitment, timely assessments and then competitive financial support for carers supported by a comprehensive training and support package.
7. We know that by providing high quality, local and stable provision we will be able to help children and young people remain settled and they will achieve good outcomes.
8. By providing these places for children in care, there will be lower numbers of external places used and a resulting reduction in spend from the Placement Budget which is used to support external fostering and residential places for children and young people.

9. It is recognised that the recruitment and retention of foster carers is a national challenge and the Fostering Excellence project is Wiltshire Council's response to this.
10. National evidence shows us that there is steady decrease in the number of foster carers overall with a small rise in Independent Fostering Agency numbers. Whilst initial enquiries increased in 2018, this was not followed by an equivalent increase in applications and, therefore, approvals.
11. We are understanding more about the impact of early childhood experiences and trauma on children and young people and so the task of foster carers in looking after our children is increasingly complex with some children requiring a specific therapeutic approach. Most typically, these children are likely to be cared for by Independent Fostering Agency carers or in residential settings and we want to make sure that Wiltshire Council foster carers can care for these children. For this reason, Fostering Excellence provides a tiered approach to the fostering task.
12. Previous recruitment campaigns, supported by a move to a Skills based payment arrangement for foster carers, has not led to the significant growth required.
13. Fostering Excellence is a more significant change centred around increased payments for carers, the development of a cohort of specifically trained "therapeutic" foster carers working alongside other carers and all of whom are supported by a comprehensive training and support offer. We will make sure all our foster carers and the staff supporting them are resilient and "trauma informed"; this will provide safety and stabilization for children, allow them to process grief and trauma and reconnect with the world, and the adults, around them.
14. Fostering Excellence is a three-year programme, beginning in 2020/21 and the recruitment targets are as follows:
 - Year 1 2020/21: 140 households + 25 – 15 (retire/leave) = 150 households
 - Year 2 2021/22: 150 + 38 – 18 = 170
 - Year 3 2022/23: 170 + 50 – 20 = 200
15. In reading this report, please note that some aspects of the new arrangements as proposed are yet to be finalised and will be further discussed with staff and foster carers; for example, the names of the tiers of fostering, the actual final payments rates, details of the wider generic support offer to foster carers. However, it is not anticipated that the final model will show significant departure from the framework as presented here.
16. The issue to be solved through Fostering Excellence is indicated above and in developing the strategy and plan for this, the following will be different:
 - Significant short-term investment is being sought to increase staffing capacity and, more importantly, to increase payments to carers
 - Improved recruitment and assessment activity
 - Improved tiered support offer to foster carers and staff, aligned with a therapeutic approach
 - Improved business and QA model with performance management
 - Simplified payment and approval arrangements

17. Fostering Excellence will impact upon all Wiltshire's children in care as our foster carers are provided with the skills and support to look after children under the terms of the project. We will approve foster carers within broader terms of approval which will allow greater flexibility and use the relationship between foster carers, their supervising social worker and the wider Fostering Service to ensure the best places are identified for children and young people.
18. The tiers of carers will be:
 - Connected Person foster carers and mainstream carers;
 - Intensive foster carers, receiving enhanced support and training;
 - Therapeutic foster carers, who will look after our most troubled children;
 - STEPS carers, providing emergency short term places for children.
19. Although the training and support will be differentiated in some ways for the groups of carers, all will be able to access an improved range of generic support opportunities developed with the support of the wider Council and some external partners. The overall aim is to make Wiltshire Council the preferred fostering agency in the area for those wishing to be foster carers.

Main considerations for the committee

20. It is too early in the life of the project to indicate actual progress and impact to date. This report is provided to Children's Select to bring an understanding of the Fostering Excellence project and the anticipated impact. This will allow Children's Select to track progress and exercise challenge.
21. To date, during the planning and early stages of implementation, the available budget has been used to:
 - Appoint a two-year fixed term Assistant Team Manager (with backfill) in the Fostering Team to provide additional capacity to support the project
 - Appoint support workers focussing on the recruitment of foster carers
 - Commit to an extensive programme of DDP training for foster carers and staff
 - Develop and agree a range of new recruitment material with an external provider ("Eleven"), with actual recruitment activity and online presence managed by Wiltshire Council Communications Team and others within the Council
22. The key decision awaited at the time of writing this report is the CLT agreement of the proposal for increase on fostering payments made to carers. This is required in order to provide the central component of Fostering Excellence and make Wiltshire Council Fostering Service competitive with others operating in the area.
23. As indicated, Fostering Excellence is designed to have significant impact over three years, from 2020/21. Looking at current (January 2020 figures) recruitment of foster carers:
 - 30 contacts from households
 - 13 formal enquiries

- 4 applications (all allocated to assessors and booked for May 2020 Foster Panel)
 - In addition, 1 application received in February 2020 – also allocated.
24. This is broadly in line with activity in the preceding year, month on month. In Q3 of 2019/20 (preceding Fostering Excellence):
- 3 fostering households were approved
 - 5 fostering households were deregistered
 - 88 contacts were received
 - 16 formal enquiries were received
 - 8 applications were received
25. Recruitment activity has continued throughout Quarter 4 to date with some approaches that are embedded within Fostering Excellence being used to support the work; for example, more immediate response times from support workers, consideration of broader approval terms. The anticipated impact of Fostering Excellence and the accompanying recruitment campaign will be to significantly increase performance over the next three years.
26. Broadly, the key milestones for the project are:
- November 2019: Families and Children’s Service SMT agree the project and outline development plan
 - December 2019: Listening and discussion events with foster carers. (Although formal feedback from carers was not recorded, both events indicated broad, positive agreement with the plans and anticipated outcomes of the project.)
 - January 2020: Sign off of new recruitment materials and campaign
 - February 2020: CLT sign-off of financial commitment
 - April 2020: Implementation of transition of foster carers to Fostering Excellence arrangements
 - April 2020: DDP training programme for foster carers and staff begins

Environmental impact of the proposal

27. Not applicable.

Equality and diversity impact of the proposal

28. The development of Fostering Excellence is designed to improve outcomes for Wiltshire Council’s children and young people in care. By improving the sufficiency of foster carers, bringing better choice and matching to the care of children it is anticipated that more of our children will be able to remain living in their communities, stay at their schools or colleges and continue to have quality contact with their families and friends.

Risk assessment

29. Risks that may arise if Fostering Excellence does not deliver improvement and therefore good outcomes for children:

- Safeguarding risk to children in care if they live with foster carers who are not able to keep them safe or who have not been prepared and supported adequately. Safeguarding is considered a high-level risk within the corporate risk register.
 - An inadequate supply of foster carers to meet the needs of Wiltshire children requiring emergency, short term and long term care or permanence through living with foster carers.
 - Reputational risk for the Council if the Agency is not effective and does not achieve good outcomes for children who need to live with foster carers.
 - Reputational risk if statutory timescales are not met regarding children in care.
 - Reputational risk if the Service is rated as Inadequate through inspection.
 - Financial risk if the proportion of our children in care living with Wiltshire Council approved foster carers does not increase.
30. Effective delivery of the Fostering Service function and the enhanced brought by the Fostering Excellence project will mitigate these risks.

Financial implications

31. When children and young people in care cannot be placed with Wiltshire Council approved foster carers, the likelihood is that they will live with foster carers from Independent Fostering Agencies or in residential care. Both of these are high cost options. By increasing the number of children living with in-house carers, the pressure on the Placement Budget used to pay for these external placements will be reduced. If Fostering Excellence does not produce the anticipated impact, the budget pressure is likely to remain as there is no predicted significant fall in the number of children in care.

Legal implications

32. None identified.

Conclusion

33. Fostering Excellence represents a significant undertaking and is a Council-wide initiative, reflecting the fact that increasing the number of our children living with Wiltshire Council approved foster carers is a Council-wide priority.
34. For many years, it has been recognised that it is hard to recruit foster carers and this project represents a commitment from the Council to try and do things differently whilst basing the initiative on what is seen to work in some other local authorities (we looked at what is in place in Outstanding graded authorities) and what we learn from our own experience and from research.
35. The aim is to have a high performing and effective Fostering Service with our carers at the heart of it. To have excellent recruitment and retention figures and to make

sure that we support a kinship-reunification approach as, fundamentally, children do better when they live with their families.

36. It is too early to present actual impact; this report sets out the aims and desired outcomes of the project.
37. It is the intention of the Fostering Service to use improved management information and performance management to develop a comprehensive dashboard of information that will be used across the Council as required to ensure positive progress and exercise required challenge where progress falters.

Author: Iona Payne, Head of Service, iona.Payne@Wiltshire.gov.uk

Background papers

The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this report:

Fostering Excellence Plan: January 2020

Fostering Success: presentation to SMT, November 2019

Appendices

None