

CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND EDUCATION SCRUTINY BOARD

FOSTER CARERS WORK GROUP

1.0 WHAT IS FOSTERING

Fostering is looking after a child who cannot live with their parents and becomes looked after by the Local Authority as a result, in Sandwell's case by the Sandwell Children's Trust. Fostering comes in many forms, it can be a very short-term arrangement, or it can mean giving a home to a child until they reach adulthood. There are many reasons why children need to be looked after and there are many people, with different skills and experiences who become foster carers.

2.0 REASONS FOR UNDERTAKING THE REVIEW

- 2.1 A performance summary reported to Corporate Parenting Board in in July 2017 highlighted the following:
- 614 looked after children (LAC) in Sandwell;
 - 469 resided in a foster placement, 270 (58%) resided with internal foster carers and 199 (42%) resided with an independent fostering agency carer;
 - 262 (43%) of LAC resided in Sandwell with 352 (57%) living in a place outside of the Borough and 64 children living 20 miles or more away from their home address.
- 2.2 The rising numbers of looked after children and associated costs of agency carers had put pressure on the corporate budget. The Scrutiny Work Group wanted to consider ways for the Council to reduce costs and encourage more people to become and remain as foster carers in Sandwell.

3.0 NATIONAL CONTEXT

- 3.1 [The Fostering System in England Review 2017](#) made 36 recommendations to the Government about how the outcomes of children in foster care could be improved. The report focussed on supporting carers to make fostering more effective, rationalising the professional supervision of foster care placements to prevent unnecessary intrusion into the life of the foster family and the child in care.
- 3.2 The DfE report recommendations highlighted the need for children who were unable to live with their own families to have the best possible experience and opportunities, that it was not just about keeping them safe but about offering continuity, access to support and opportunities.
- 3.3 The report highlighted that the last thing that was needed was for the foster carer to be a dispassionate and subjective advocate for the child or children in their care; the final recommendation was that foster carers needed to be treated professionally.
- 3.4 The review found wide inconsistencies and a general lack of clarity about the compensation and reward given to carers.
- 3.5 Evidence from the 'Fostering Network' suggested that there was a shortfall of approximately 5,900 in the number of carers in England however the review found that although more carers were needed, there was not an absolute shortage and the majority of children needing a fostering placement on any one day were placed. Any shortages were found to be due to geography or the availability of carers who could look after more challenging children.
- 3.6 The review supported the development of a register of foster carers, so that matching could be underpinned by accurate and current information about carers experience, skills and availability. There was also a need to find out why carers leave before retirement.
- 3.7 Other areas covered in the review related to matching, contact and siblings. One positive area of the report was a strengthening of the roles of child/young person and their carer's. The report called for a systematic review of the experiences of those in foster care and a greater focus on their voice in decision making about their lives.

- 3.8 A second positive was that the report called for a restoration of parental capacity for carers, so that they felt able to show love and affection to individual children, for having a central role in day-to-day and longer-term decision making, and having a 'parental' role in their foster children's lives beyond 21st birthday.
- 3.9 A third positive was the practical recommendations to improve the system for planning and commissioning foster care provision and rationalising the care roles where they may not be working effectively.
- 3.10 The report has not been translated in legislation yet and the 2013 regulation still applies

4.0 **BACKGROUND AND LOCAL CONTEXT**

- 4.1 A Fostering Update was provided to Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board on 24th April 2017.
- 4.2 The report highlighted issues such as the cost of children in care in Sandwell and that Sandwell had a consistently high percentage of children in care when compared with national and regional Local Authorities.
- 4.3 Ofsted inspections had highlighted that there were issues and matters that required improvement in children's services several changes were outlined but children's services remained inadequate and required improvement.
- 4.4 Scrutiny Board noted that numbers of children in care in Sandwell fluctuated but was on the increase and was higher than the regional and national average. The Board emphasised the need for more in-house foster carers to be recruited and was advised that an aim of Children's Services was to appoint 30 foster carers per annum, year on year to build a consistent foster carer offer.
- 4.5 Scrutiny Board resolved to include the 'Foster Carer Offer' in the Work Programme 2017-18 and a work group was established to find out more about the current foster carer offer in Sandwell and future arrangements for foster carers.

5.0 MAIN CONSIDERATIONS OF THE WORK GROUP

5.1 Purpose:

- What was the Sandwell fostering offer?
- What more could the Council do to support foster carers in Sandwell?
- What more could it do to improve the fostering offer in Sandwell?
- What did it offer in comparison with Foster agencies?
- How did it celebrate foster carer achievements?

5.2 The aims of the review

- To aspire to Sandwell becoming a foster friendly local authority.
- To improve the foster carer offer and ensure support by professionals and peers in their role.
- To recruit and retain foster carers.
- To improve training for foster carers.
- To ensure children in care had stability and experience of secure family life.
- To actively promote foster caring to the hard to reach groups.
- To promote maximum satisfaction to foster.
- To give foster carers opportunity to shape the foster carer offer.

5.3 The Foster Carers Work Group comprised of Councillors Phillips, Ashman, Hickey, Preece and Saeed. The object of the work group was to explore what existing council services and work streams could do to improve the fostering offer in Sandwell for people who fostered in Sandwell and people who worked for Sandwell Council and were foster carers.

5.4 The Work Group had been advised that Sandwell Council needed to increase the number of foster carer's and to do what it could to retain foster carer's in what was a very challenging and essential role. The rising number of looked after children and associated costs of agency carers continued to put pressure on the corporate budget.

5.5 The Work Group aims were to make recommendations to build a strong and secure base of foster carers in Sandwell; to keep young people safe and to help them feel respected and cared for. The Work Group aligned its work to the priority that 'all children benefit from the best start in life and had access to community life, leisure and entertainment in

neighbourhoods where families chose to bring up their families’.

- 5.6 The Work Group looked at alternatives and possible improvements to the way Sandwell provided foster care, including possibility of waged carers that could take on Sandwell’s most challenging young people, those that had been in residential care or remand and demonstrated complex and challenging behaviours.
- 5.7 A survey of foster carers was carried out by Social Workers on behalf of the Scrutiny Work Group, findings were shared with Children’s Services and Scrutiny Board and are included in paragraph 6.1 of this report.
- 5.8 Council Services were contacted to find out what the current offer and current incentives were for foster carers and what more could be offered. Findings were shared with Children’s Services and Scrutiny Board and are considered in paragraph 6.2 of this report.
- 5.9 The Work Group reported its initial findings to the Children’s Services and Education Scrutiny Board on 12 March 2018. The Board felt that feedback from the Fostering Work Group gave a useful insight into the foster carers’ perceptions and possible incentives for foster carers moving forward.

6.0 TIMING

- 6.1 On 12th March 2018 Scrutiny Board received feedback from the Fostering Work Group and an Update about the Sandwell Children’s Trust from the Interim Executive Director. The Trust Project Director advised the Board that the Trust would go live on 1st April 2018.
- 6.2 The Trust had been registered with Ofsted and would be setting up an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) and an Independent Adoption Agency (IAA). Officers were working closely with foster carers to inform and re-assure them to help the transition move smoothly.
- 6.3 There was a lot happening at this time to prepare for the move to the Trust, which was going live on 1 April 2018, there would be an Ofsted inspection visit 30-31 May 2018 and there would be a period of settling in for the Trust and services that had transferred to the Trust.
- 6.4 In addition, there were changes in management of Children’s Services. The Interim Director of Children’s Services left the Authority at the end of March 2018, new Directors were appointed at the Trust and there

was a period before the Council's new Director for Children's Services came into post.

6.5 The summary report of the findings of the Fostering Work Group was delayed due to timing of several conflicting and impacting matters. The main messages from the work had been shared informally with the relevant officers, at the work group meetings and at Scrutiny Board meeting prior to the Trust going live on 1st April 2018.

7.0 FINDINGS

7.1 The Foster Carer Survey

7.1.1 The survey was prepared to send out to all foster carers electronically, however, officers from Children's Services determined that due to data protection the email should be sent from Fostering Services and that it was not timely to do so as a survey had recently been sent to all foster carers relating to the change to the Trust. The questions from the survey were asked on a one to one basis with foster carers.

7.1.2 Only 28 out of almost 280 foster carers completed the survey (10%), therefore the evaluation only reflected the views of foster carers who had been approached by officers. The Work Group agreed that the feedback was varied but useful, it highlighted several issues for further investigation by Children's Services about fostering in Sandwell.

7.1.3 The responses included interesting suggestions and comment made about training, housing provision and individual experiences regarding support and communication.

7.1.4 The comments received in relation to training included current and future provision, and highlighted the need for flexible times (week days, evenings and weekends), a range of methods for training (virtual and face to face sessions) and the need for more awareness about specific medical conditions, fostering processes and structures.

7.1.5 There were unfavourable comments which highlighted a lack of consistency from social workers and their varied levels of experience regarding support, responsiveness and communication. Members recognised that foster carers also had varied experience and levels of support required.

7.1.6 There were favourable comments about excellent support for foster carers and a positive view of fostering in Sandwell.

7.1.7 It was highlighted that relationships in foster homes were often disrupted due to staff turnover and administrative delays, also bonds had been broken with children due to rapid change.

7.1.8 The feedback was collated by Children's Services officers and had informed and helped to shape the future Foster Care Offer. A summary of all of the questions raised and responses given is attached. (Appendix 1).

7.2 Council Services

7.2.1 At the request of the Scrutiny Work Group, officers in relevant service groups listed incentives that were offered by the Council to Foster Carers in Sandwell. The following responses were collated from Leisure, Housing and Council Tax Services:

7.2.2 Leisure offer

- a) Leisure pass benefits to the Looked After Child are:
 - FREE public Swimming
 - FREE Gym & Fitness Classes
 - FREE Swimming Lessons
 - FREE Holiday Camps
 - FREE Coached Activities
 - Up to 10% Off all other bookable activities
 - Advanced booking facility
- b) Free entry for Care/Social workers who must accompany Looked After Children for activities where applicable.
- c) All foster families receive the following benefits:
 - FREE public swimming
 - FREE Gym & Fitness Classes
 - Up to 50% off Holiday Camps
 - Up to 50% off Swimming Lessons
 - Up to 10% Off all other bookable activities
 - Advanced booking facility
- d) Leisure Pass can be used at the following Centres:
 - Haden Hill Leisure Centre
 - Hadley Stadium
 - Harry Mitchell Leisure Centre
 - Langley Swimming Centre

- Portway Lifestyle Centre
- Smethwick Swimming Centre
- Tipton Leisure Centre
- Tipton Sports Academy
- Wednesbury Leisure Centre

7.2.3 Housing Offer

As per the Council's existing policy, priority within housing allocations policy is given to foster carers and those approved by the Council to adopt who need to move to a larger home in order to accommodate a looked after child. Reference: Housing Allocations Policy (effective from 17.04.13).

7.2.4 Council Tax

The Service Manager Appeals was contacted regarding the possibility of a Council Tax deduction for foster carers. He advised that Wolverhampton City Council did not offer Council Tax relief for foster carers as previously indicated. It was explained that the fostering payment included an amount for council tax, but no amount was specified.

There is no legislative relief for foster carers paying council tax, it would be up to Sandwell Council to decide whether to provide local relief, but obviously assessments around those eligible and ineligible would need to be conducted alongside cost implications

7.3 Other Council Incentives investigated for Foster Carers

7.3.1 Fostering Training Plan April 2017

The Training, Support and Development Plan 2017 for foster carers in Sandwell highlighted opportunities for foster carers.

7.3.2 Time off for public duties

The Work Group looked at opportunities to 'grow our own' staff in the Council and to include foster carers in current policies e.g. carers leave, emergency leave and time off for public duties. Council employees benefit from [Magistrates / time off for public duties etc](#) and [School Governors/ time off for public duties](#)

7.3.3 Flexibility training and recruitment:

Other agencies were identified as providing training at weekends and evenings but at the time of evidence gathering the Council did not have the capacity to offer training for foster carers out of normal working hours.

By recruiting foster carers to the Council, the authority could save at least £10k per annum as opposed to going to a private foster agency. This would be the case for the Children's Trust once the Trust goes live.

7.3.4 Foster Friendly Council

The Work Group discussed the possibility of the Council becoming a Foster Friendly Council. The background papers contain the links to 'Fostering Friendly Policy' and 'Combining Fostering and Other Work' reports.

7.3.5 Venues for foster carer groups and support meetings

The Work Group considered that it was important for foster carers to talk to peers and support workers to share experiences and issues. They determined that it would be helpful if the Council could consider making venues available for foster carer groups to hold support meetings at low or no cost to the support group as an incentive.

7.3.6 Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)

During evidence gathering, the following key points were raised:

- The Sandwell Fostering Service would be registering as an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA). The Sandwell Children's Trust, Fostering was likely to happen end of summer early autumn 2018.
- There would be a registered manager of the service and an appointed person – both would be responsible for fostering.
- The IFA would have to be inspected by Ofsted
- The service would be standalone and would rewrite, refresh and rebrand fostering in Sandwell. At the time of the evidence gathering the Council was looking at procedures, using what we already knew and putting together with another part that was brand new (the IFA would be a different framework).
- At the time of the evidence gathering the move to the Trust was 6 weeks away and the Council was waiting for a response in relation

to the IFA. The Wellman Building was complete and staff were moving into the building.

- Fostering would be at Wellman Building.

8.0 THE CURRENT POSITION

8.1 The Children's Trust came into effect 1st April 2018. Foster Carers were transferred under TUPE arrangements to the Sandwell Children's Trust.

8.2 The number of children receiving support from Children's Services in Sandwell at the beginning in March 2018 was as follows:

- 2,871 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service.
- 871 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan.
- 1 child lived in a privately arranged fostering placement.
- 753 children were being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 95 per 10,000 children).
- 406 (or 54%) lived outside the local authority area.
- 54 lived in residential children's homes, of whom 92% live outside the authority area.
- None lived in residential special schools.
- 576 lived with foster families, of whom 51% live outside the authority area.
- 59 lived with parents, of whom 15% live outside the authority area.
- 22 were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

8.3 Department for Education has published [Fostering Better Outcomes](#) - The Government response to the Education Select Committee into fostering and Foster Care in England 2017, it was presented to Parliament in July 2018.

8.4 Following an Ofsted Inspection in the summer The Sandwell Children's Trust, [Improvement Plan](#) was considered and approved by Sandwell Council Cabinet at a meeting 19 September 2018.

8.5 The actions and aims were aligned were to the Ofsted Single Inspection Framework (SIF) recommendations and prioritised:

1. Leadership
2. Workforce
3. Practice
4. Children Looked After

5. CSE, Exploitation, Missing & Trafficked
6. Performance and Quality Assurance
7. Partnership
8. Voice and Experience of the Child

- 8.6 Priority 4 – Children Looked After, Care Leavers and Permanence
 ‘This is a fundamental priority of the plan as we believe that as ‘Corporate Parents’ we have a duty to make sure that that decisions about our children and young people becoming looked after are based on robust social work practice supported by a rigorous framework which facilitate safe, stable permanent placements which support and drive positive, sustainable outcomes where our children thrive and achieve.
- 8.7 The Improvement Plan highlighted the need to review the fostering service and external placement strategy. The recommendations, aims and actions relate to Foster Carers are below 8.8.1 & 8.8.2:

8.7.1 **Ofsted**

Recommendation (O9) Increase the number of foster carers to meet the varied needs of children looked after.	
Aims - Children are matched to carers which support them living with siblings and as close to their existing communities as possible Review if there is an option to develop one or explore block contract arrangement with providers in the region – with linked step-down foster carers (Nov 2018)	Actions - Provider Services Group Head Review and develop the current foster care sufficiency strategy and actions being taken to increase the number of foster carers. (July 2018)

8.7.2 **Single Inspection Framework 2017**

Recommendations (S2) Ensure that fosters carers are clear about their delegated responsibilities and are furnished with sufficient, timely information about children in order that they can make informed decisions.	
Aims - Foster carers are clear about their roles and delegated responsibilities and confidently make decisions based on detailed information about the child. ‘Foster to Adopt’ is considered by all social workers working with and supporting foster carers.	Actions - Provider Services Group Head ‘Foster to adopt’ policy to be reviewed and disseminated with a clear focus on increasing the number of foster to adopt’ carers. (Nov 2018).

<p>Aims continued:- The Fostering Service is to review its policies and where appropriate relaunch training to ensure that the Foster Service is compliant with all regulatory standards. (Nov 2018)</p>	<p>Actions continued:- Provider Services Group Head Provide additional training to social workers and managers to ensure that they are clear about the importance of sharing key information with carers/providers. (Nov 2018).</p>
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9.0 CONCLUSIONS

- 9.1 The Work Group found that there was a need for the Council to recruit and retain foster carers in Sandwell and to highlight the value of improving the offer for foster carers to reduce the cost of agency foster carers.
- 9.2 The Work Group found that there was a need to review the incentives for foster carers and what more the Council could do to improve the offer and support fosters carers that work in Sandwell Council and that live in Sandwell in their role.
- 9.3 The Work Group findings inform the actions arising from Ofsted and Single Inspection Framework inspections.

10.0 Background papers:

[The Fostering System in England Review 2017](#)
[Foster Care Charter 2011](#)
[Fostering Better Outcomes 2018](#)

Appendix 1

The Sandwell Fostering Offer Survey - Results

Questions / Responses

Other than being a foster carer for Sandwell

(1) Are you engaged in any form of employment?

Yes (Full-time)	6
Yes (Part-time)	3
No	18

If yes are you currently an employee of Sandwell MBC?

Yes	1 (part/time)
No	8

If Yes, as a Council employee, is there anything the Council can do to make your role as a Foster Carer easier?

No comments

(2) To what extent would the following be of interest to you?

	1 Not at all	2 some extent	3 Very much
How to deal with complex young people.	3	15	9
Council tax reduction each year for fostering young people for 250+ days of the year.	4	6	18
Financial bonus for looking after young children for 250+ days of the year.	1	6	14
Training adapted to your specific needs.	2	7	15
Timing of training to meet your needs	2	7	16
Greater support in my role as a foster carer	5	9	10

- (3) Are you aware of the training opportunities available to foster carers in Sandwell? 26 responded yes

If yes, is the programme extensive enough to cover your learning requirements as a Foster Carer?

Yes – it completely meets my needs	15
Yes – it partially meets my needs	9
No – it does not meet my needs	2

If no, what other training courses could be included or improved?

<p>Work shop to find out more about the structure of the department, how children come into care and how decisions are made until they reach the foster carer.</p> <p>Training for disabilities e.g. global development delay; Chromosome abnormality.</p> <p>Weekend training.</p>

- (4) Would alternative ways of training be of interest to you?

Such as	No	Yes
Workshops	1	15
Away days	1	3
On line training other	1	14
Evening	1	1

If other, please specify

Workshops include experience foster carers giving advice.
Artemis on-line training can be done anytime, at home and at night.
On-line training due to ill timings at present.
Drug awareness for young Adults- families to take part together.
Evening and online training.
Weekend, evening or school holiday training events/ meetings
Dealing with children/babies with complex needs.
Conference call seminars
On-site childcare would help foster carers.

(5) How many children would you normally foster at any one time?

1	1 - 2	2	3	4
9	3	4	4	1

(6) What type of foster care do you normally provide?

Long term	18
Emergency	4
Specialist e.g. disability	4
Short term	4
Respite	2

(7) Would you consider fostering more children at one time e.g. siblings?

Yes	19
No	8

If no, what were the reasons or barriers for you not doing so?

Down sized house from a six to a three-bedroom house.
Only have two spare rooms or would have more children.
Feel taking another child would disturb the long-term placement.

(8) Has the number of spare rooms in your home or your Council housing provision in Sandwell affected on your ability to foster more young people?

Yes	9
No	16

- (9) Have you attended or engaged in events and initiatives that raise the public profile of fostering?

Yes	12
No	14

(10)

Would you be in supporting further events? If so, please provide contact details.

Yes	8
No	2

- (11) Do you have any other comments to make about fostering in Sandwell?

- Some social workers had been good but others not do good.
- The good social workers seem to leave. Why is the Council not trying to keep the good social workers?
- I have received in-house training and have been a mentor for other carers on a voluntary basis.
- We have had no problems working with Sandwell and know that it is the lack of investment causing the problems that Sandwell have.
- Majority of carers feel that there is no support to carers and extended families. Morale extremely low, turnover of staff, no communication, feel criticised at times. Would not recommend Sandwell as a first choice for fostering.
- Excellent support for foster carers – placements always very helpful, informative and at the end of the phone for them.
- Staff change too much, bonds with children broken due to this paper work was lost.
- Still waiting for five months bus pass money as paper work gone missing with the staff.
- Level of communication with social worker of two of the placements very poor.
- Slow progress of cases – no sense of urgency to sort out the child's future.
- A tailored approach to supervision would be good. People who provide respite care still receive six-week supervision but do not have permanent placements this is a waste of time – nothing to discuss. Moving to 12-week supervision could be considered. Need to be more flexible to focus on the carers needs.
- We have to attend many hospital and specialist appointments lots of home visits.
- Very positive view of fostering in Sandwell.

- Fostering in Sandwell is very rewarding.
- Some training is repeated for older carers.
- Would like to see honest and quicker communication between department and the foster carers. Can be frustrating, the lack of support and lack of communication.
- Carers want to be respected and to offer the best care they can to vulnerable children in their care.
- Would like to see more support for younger people regardless of their needs.