

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Report

Committee:	Children and Young People Select Committee
Date:	17 September 2021
Title:	Fostering Annual Report 2020/21
Report From:	Director of Children's Services

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Purpose of this Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update to the Children and Young People Select Committee on Hampshire County Council's Fostering Service.

Recommendation

2. That the contents of this report are noted by the Children and Young People Select Committee.

Executive Summary

3. The Fostering Annual Report 2020/21 provides an overview of Hampshire County Council's fostering activity, detailing statistical performance data and highlighting areas of focus for the year ahead.

Introduction

4. This report provides an update on Hampshire County Council's Fostering Service in line with fostering services statutory regulations and guidance.
5. During 2020/2021 the service successfully recruited and approved 29 new fostering households.
6. At the end of March 2021 there were 470 registered Foster Carers in Hampshire.

7. Registered Foster Carers are provided ongoing support, supervision and training from the Fostering Support Teams. The 470 registered Foster Carers are made up of:
8. 345 County Carers. These are stranger Foster Carers who are assessed to look after unknown/unrelated children. Once approved they will be considered to care for any child that requires a placement.
9. 113 Connected Foster Carers. These are family and friends carers that have been assessed to care for a specific child or children. These family members or close family friends are often put forward to be assessed by birth parents during care proceedings.
10. 12 Home from Home carers. These are carers assessed to provide respite care for disabled children.
11. The Fostering Service has a marketing strategy for 2020/2021 with a target to provide 187 additional fostering placements by 31 March 2023. The marketing strategy has been compiled using recommendations provided by research completed by the Insight and Engagement team as part of our Modernising Placements Programme which is focussing on increasing the number of fostering households.

The Fostering Service

12. During 2020/2021 Hampshire Fostering Service was comprised of four teams.
13. The **Recruitment and Assessment Team** is a team of social workers, support worker, a marketing officer, and a panel co-ordinator. The team is responsible for marketing activity to recruit new Foster Carers to meet the needs of Hampshire children, visiting potential foster carers, completing fostering assessments and supporting applicants through to fostering panel.
14. There are two **Fostering Support teams, East and West**. The teams support approved foster carers, providing supervision and training to ensure foster carers' practice continues to meet the National Minimum Standards.
15. The **Connected Carers' Assessment Team** carries out assessments for fostering applicants who have a pre-existing relationship with a specific child and supports these applicants through to fostering panel.

Recruitment of Foster Carers

16. In 2020/2021, Fostering Hampshire Children utilised informative and invaluable research such as MOSIAC persona and census data to create specific audience profiles to design targeted marketing activity with the aim of increasing the recruitment of Foster Carers.
17. COVID-19 meant an event strategy reconsideration was a necessity. Informative drop-in and celebration events were transitioned online while scheduled community events or public space recruitment stands were scaled back with more of a focus instead on targeted digital marketing activity such as social media, search, radio, Spotify and television broadcasting.
18. During 20/21, we launched the all-year round “You Can” campaign to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions regarding fostering using real and authentic stories and testimonials directly related to our regional audience. These operated alongside our annual Foster Care Fortnight and Foster Focus Week initiatives to raise awareness, recognition, and inspiration towards fostering children in the county.
19. We have continued to invest in our digital channels and continue to see engagement growth with potential Foster Carers. Compared to 2019/2020, we have increased our website page views by 106.84% on comparison.
20. Recruitment Data for 2020/21
 - a. 256
Number of enquiries
 - b. 143
Number of Initial Home Visits
 - c. 93
Number of assessments initiated
 - d. 29
Number of approvals
 - e. 11.3%
Conversion rate from enquiry to approval

Fostering Support

21. The service is constantly developing to ensure that we have Foster Carers available to meet the needs of Hampshire children.

22. This year we have had to change a number of training courses to be available online. We have also reviewed the foster carer training pathway and opened up further courses to Foster Carers, encouraging them to participate in training alongside residential staff.
23. Each year we undertake a fostering survey to gather the views and experiences of our Foster Carers to support and improve our service. The annual Foster Carer Survey of June 2021 provided the following results:
24. 20% of Foster Carers responded to the survey this year in comparison with 29% in 2020. This is a marked decrease, and we will be working with our Foster Carers to explore alternative ways to gather their feedback.
25. 13.5% of carers felt that they had a placement where they were not equipped to meet the child's care needs. This is a decrease from 24% in 2020 which is positive and suggested more informed matching.
26. 61% of Foster Carers also reported that they felt empowered or able to change their approval to take a wider range of children, this compares to 56% in 2020.
27. Around 37% of carers have experienced a child leaving their care through reunification (a return home or to wider family), this has increased from 30% last year.
28. 62% of Foster Carers felt satisfied or very satisfied with the support from the Fostering Service, compared to 74% in 19/20 which shows an unfortunate decrease which may have been influenced by our need to change the way we support carers during Covid 19. The impact of Covid 19 resulted in much of the fostering service support being offered virtually which is likely have impacted upon this satisfaction level.
29. 61% of Foster Carers felt satisfied or very satisfied with children's Social Workers, this is a slight increase on 60% in 2020.
30. The most significant change in satisfaction level related to foster carers satisfaction with the recruitment process, increasing from 46% of respondents being satisfied or very satisfied in 2020 to 62% in 2021. Fostering Recruitment and Assessment has been a focus of the Modernising Placements Programme over the last year implementing changes to improve the applicant's experience which was a likely contributing factor to this increased satisfaction.
31. Another area of improvement was with foster carers satisfaction with the work of the Placement Commissioning Service, increasing from 55% of respondents being satisfied or very satisfied in 2020 to 61% in 2021.

Connected Carers

32. Connected Carers are family and friends carers that have been assessed to care for a specific child or children. Often, birth parents request that the department assesses these family members or close family friends during care proceedings. In 2019, Connected Carers' Assessing Social Workers moved under the structure of the District Social Work teams to promote improved joint working. There were a number of benefits seen as a result of this change of structure but also some challenges. Co-locating children's Social Workers and assessing Social Workers has improved joint working and sharing of fostering knowledge, however there were some challenges in ensuring consistency across the county and difficulty with no central oversight. As part of a piece of work looking at children coming into care, this structure has been reviewed and from August 2021 the Social Workers within the team will come back under one manager. They will remain co-located to maintain the working relationships that have been built. The team will be renamed as the 'Family Connections Service' and will have a wider focus that will include supporting carers of children under Special Guardianship Orders.

33. Connected Carers' Team Referrals & Assessments 20/21

Number of referrals for the year

a. 484

Number allocated for assessment

b. 484

Number of positive assessments

c. 131

Fostering Panel

34. A fostering panel is a meeting held to consider an applicant's:

- request to become a foster carer or,
- continued approval after their first year of fostering, or where there are practice issues or,
- de-registration if there are concerns about their practice

35. Fostering panels are governed by fostering legislation and guidance. The fostering panel's primary legal function is to make a recommendation about a person's suitability to be a foster carer

36. Hampshire Children's Services has six Fostering Panels that are held each month. Each panel will hear a maximum of five cases.

37. Since March 2020 all Fostering Panels have been held virtually. Whilst initially challenging, this has worked well, and panel members have adapted well to this change. Panel members are looking forward to being able to return to face-to-face panels in the near future.
38. Panel chairs appraisals took place in June 2021 which included an observation of practice.
39. The Service Manager meets with panel chairs on a quarterly basis to discuss any themes in panel, issues, training and development needs. Due to the pandemic, our usual full day panel training was not thought to be successful virtually, instead the service delivered four, two-hour online workshops to foster panel members. The feedback from this was positive and we will plan a mixture of face to face and virtual training for panel members in 2021/2022.

Statistics and Performance

40. At the end of March 2021 there were 470 registered Foster Carers in Hampshire. This does not include those carers only offering Staying Put as they are no longer registered Foster Carers. Staying Put is the term used for when young people remain living with their foster carers after they have turned 18.
41. These households can be broken down into their different registrations.

Table 1: Types of Household Registration

Registration (by household)	March 2020
County Foster Carer	345
Connected Foster carer	113
Specialist Respite Care	12
Staying Put only (not approved Foster Carers so not included in the 470 figure of registered foster carer above)	14
Total	484

Table 2: Foster Carers on Hold

	June 2020	September 2020	December 2020	March 2021	Year Average
East	11	9	14	9	12
West	13	13	12	19	20
Total	24	22	26	28	25

35. The average number of foster carer households on hold at any one time is 25. These have been for a variety of reasons, including Foster Carers choosing to take a break, other family or work commitments, and a small number due to complaint or allegation. The most significant reason for being on hold during 2020 was due to self-isolating due to a vulnerability in the household.

Timeliness of Household Reviews

36. It is required that foster carers have a household review completed annually to review the foster carer's approval and to determine whether the foster carer and their household continue to be suitable to foster. It also considers the ages and numbers of children that can be placed with specific carers and whether these needs altering or continue to be appropriate.

Table 3: Timeliness of Household Reviews

% of Foster Carers with HHR's recorded in time	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Year average
	89%	91%	93%	91%	91%

37. The number of foster carer households with a timely household review has remained above 90% in the past three quarters. Foster Carers on hold contribute to those households that have an overdue household review.

Timeliness of Supervision Visits

38. Foster carers should receive supervision from a supervising social worker every six weeks.

Table 4: Timeliness of Supervision Visits

% of Foster Carers with supervision recorded in time	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Year average
	94%	82%	93%	89%	90%

39. There was a dip in performance in Q2, however this was picked up by Q3. Q2 (Jul/Aug/Sept) was a time when UK holidays were allowed, and a number of foster carer households made last minute plans to travel within the UK during the school holidays therefore were unavailable.

Timeliness of Unannounced Visits

40. Foster carers should have an annual unannounced visit from a supervising social worker.

Table 5: Timeliness of Unannounced Visits

% of Foster Carers with unannounced visits in time	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Year average
	89%	93%	98%	98%	95%

41. The service has continued to ensure a high level of compliance in completing and timely recording of unannounced visits.

Foster Carer Medicals

42. Foster carers are required to have a medical review every 3 years. The timescales for these medical reviews are always a challenge for the department because parts of the process sit with the foster carers own GP and other parts with specialist medical advisors. Therefore, where there is a delay, we are sometimes not clear where the process has got stuck.

Table 6: Foster Carer Medicals

% of Foster Carers with medical rechecks in time	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Year average
	79%	76%	72%	76%	76%

43. Overdue medicals checks are a continuing area of focus for the department. There is a reporting process in place that provides the supervising social workers with a weekly report of those checks that are due in the next three months so these can be initiated three months before they are due.

44. We had hoped to have explored solutions to streamlining our medical recheck process with possible IT support, however progress on this halted during 20/21 due to the pandemic. At one stage GPs were unable to offer any medical rechecks and medical information was self-disclosed. Towards the end of 20/21, some GPs had started to offer fostering medicals again although some of them remain virtual appointments. Where there was a concern for a foster carer's health we escalated cases to our health colleagues and made specific requests for a consultation which was a helpful intervention. This remains an area of focus for 2021/22.

DBS Checks

Table 7: DBS Checks

% of Foster Carers and adult household members with DBS checks in timescales	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Year average
	88%	90%	92%	89%	90%

45. There is a tracking spreadsheet for all DBS checks that evidence DBS checks are being initiated in a timely way. There have been occasions of Foster Carers not responding to the electronic link they are sent in a timely way and this step needing to be repeated. There will always be a number of DBS checks that are outstanding due to young people turning 18 years whilst in the foster placement, we are unable to initiate a DBS check until their 18th birthday which causes an outstanding check whilst we await it being returned, however this number is very low.

Foster carer deregistration's

Table 8: Numbers of Carers Deregistered

	Q1 2020/21	Q2 2020/21	Q3 2020/21	Q4 2020/21
County carers	17	11	16	6
Connected carers	22	11	15	11
Specialist respite care	0	0	1	0
	39	22	32	17

46. Over 20/21 there have been 110 fostering households that have been de-registered, 59 of these households were Connected Carers of which 44 were a result of positive outcomes for the children through Adoption, Special Guardianship, moving on to independent living and reunification.

47. Of the remaining Carers deregistered, 6 were Fostering to Adopt arrangements and 1 Family Link Household.

48. Of the 44 County Carer deregistration's:

49. Three households were a result of carer separation, in two cases one carer continued as a single carer

50. Four households continued to provide care under Special Guardianship, Adoption or Staying Put.

51. Of the remaining 37 county carer fostering households that de-registered the most predominant reason provided was a change in Foster Carers' circumstances including changes of employment or family caring commitments. Five fostering households cited Covid 19 as impacting their decision, for example needing to cease fostering to protect vulnerable family members or the impact of lockdown on their own or family members emotional wellbeing. Whilst support was provided to Foster Carers during lockdown including increased social worker contact, provision of virtual support groups and training, time in lockdown also prompted many people to re-evaluate their circumstances and make life changing decisions. There were a number of Foster Carers who decided the time was right for them to retire, resign or move to be near family members and care for grandchildren. Whilst these decisions may or may not have been a direct result of the pandemic, it is certainly true that a significant change in the way we live, provided a time of reflection for many people.

Complaints and Allegations against Foster Carers

52. The Council has a Complaints and Allegations against Foster Carers procedure as required by the Fostering Services Regulations 2011.

53. In total there have been 68 concerns/complaints/allegations initiated within the 2020/21 period.

54. These were concluded as the following

Table 9: Number of Concerns, Complaints & Allegations

Concern	Complaint	Allegation
25	25	18

55. Of these concerns, complaints and allegations, the outcomes were:

Table 10: Outcomes of Concerns, Complaints & Allegations

Continued fostering	61
De-registration	7

56. No cases were presented to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) in 20/21.

Modernising Placements Programme (MPP)

57. The Modernising Placements Programme is a substantial transformation programme that commenced in November 2019 with the aim of ensuring that Hampshire's children in care are provided with the right support at the right time. The needs of our children have increased over recent years, and with the success of our Transforming Social Care programme ensuring that children can remain at home wherever it is safe to do so, those children who are in our care have the most complex needs. Corporate funding was approved by Cabinet in February 2021 with funding secured against the MPP business case. Since this approval, work has focussed on progressing the new developments which has included recruitment to roles and further detailed planning.

58. We need to ensure that our Foster Carers have the skills, support and capability to respond to our children's needs and MPP is focussed on all aspects of the journey for a Foster Carer from enquiry right through to approval and support.

59. The developments within this programme in 20/21 are:

The Hampshire Hive

60. MPP has developed a local community for HCC fostering families that is based around an extended family model for children in care. The aim of the fostering network is to increase the support available to Foster Carers resulting in increased placement stability, and an increase in Foster Carers' confidence to support children. This model has been developed with the support of Hampshire Foster Carers and will bring together 6 – 8 fostering households offering mutual support in a natural extended family environment. Each Hive of fostering families will be supported by a Hive Carer Support Worker (an experienced Foster Carer) who in conjunction with support from the fostering service social workers, will provide coaching, training, social events, flexible telephone support and sleepovers.

61. Six Hive Carer Support Workers were recruited in April 2021 and the Hives were launched in May. These are current Foster Carers with significant experience who have been employed alongside their fostering role. Supporting Hive Carer Support Workers will be Hive Link Carers who will be available for sleepovers and day care. Feedback from those carers and children who are part of a Hive has been very positive so far.

Paying Foster Carers

62. The processes we use to pay Foster Carers have been reviewed following foster carer feedback. Foster Carers now have access to an online form which they can submit reducing delay that was sometimes experienced through the previous paper-based system.

63. The programme continues to consider fostering payments. A survey was conducted in June 2021 asking Foster Carers from all agencies to express their views about the support that is important to them, including finance. The findings of this survey will contribute to progressing our development work in this area.

Training Pathway

64. The foster carer training pathway has been revised and refreshed. Hampshire Approach training will shortly be rolled out to all Foster Carers in September 2021. The training pathway has identified and made available shared learning with children's home staff that will bring benefits to all.

Foster Carer Approvals

65. The marketing strategy has been updated and developed using the learning from the discovery phase of the programme. New recruitment strategies were trialled including Sky TV Ad smart which targets specific household demographics in our chosen areas and will play our ad in place of a national advert.
66. Significant work has been carried out by the Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team to streamline their processes and ensure that the customer experience they offer is high quality and engaging. A recent mystery shopper survey which was undertaken as part of the South East Sector Led Improvement Partnership (SESLIP) with a group of south east local authority fostering services, judged Hampshire to be the top performing authority.
67. Investment has also brought additional roles and skills to the team including a dedicated Head of Service for two years to establish new approaches and developments to support the required increased recruitment of new Foster Carers.

The Psychological Service and Trauma Informed Care

68. A new psychological service, led by a clinical psychologist, will enhance how looked after children are parented by Foster Carers and residential care staff. It will support the implementation of trauma informed and therapeutically minded parenting and will provide a consultation service to those involved in caring for children. This will lead to an increase in staff and carers' resilience, confidence and capability to support children with more challenging behaviour.
69. We were unsuccessful in recruiting to this role in the first two rounds of interviews but are working with our partners in Health to progress this as a shared priority.

70. There are further developments in the pipeline including a new vacancy management app which will support the service to maintain up to date vacancy records and inform children's matching with fostering families and informative support groups for Foster Carer applicants within the assessment process, so they are better equipped at the point of approval.

Hampshire Fostering Network (HFN)

71. The service continues to work closely with Hampshire Fostering Network. The service attends the monthly committee meetings and facilitates monthly operational meetings with the Fostering Service Manager, the CIC lead and HFN chair and vice chair. In the past year these meetings have been held virtually. The service continues to communicate information to HFN and work closely with members when reviewing practice and policies.

Conclusions

72. The Fostering Service has continued in its efforts to provide a high level of support and supervision to Hampshire foster carers.
73. 29 new foster carer households were approved in 20/21, however 42 county foster carer households also deregistered (excluding the 9 households who continued to care for the children under different orders). The focus for 21/22 will be on recruitment and retention in order to increase our overall foster carer household numbers. Work within the Modernising Placements Programme has supported the service to introduce new focus to the Recruitment and Assessment teams with additional recruitment and marketing managers to oversee and drive this work forward.
74. The foster carer training pathway has been reviewed to support Foster Carers to meet the changing needs of our looked after children. Further training courses are being explored with an aim to provide some learning opportunities for carers looking after children with higher needs and more complex behaviours.
75. There remains a need to improve the process for ensuring that Foster Carers have medical and DBS rechecks, and this remains a focus for 20/21.
76. Overall satisfaction levels remained similar to previous years with improvements in some areas and some deterioration in others that will need further understanding. The feedback from the Foster Carers survey represented a smaller group this year and we will be working with Foster Carers to review how we gather feedback in the future and if a survey is the best method.

77. This has been a challenging year to maintain a high level of support and service delivery. The service has adapted very quickly to provide additional support when needed and to transfer events and training to online forums. There have been a number of successful developments including a new foster carer training pathway, a new online Foster Carers claims form and the introduction of our new support system for Foster Carers, the Hampshire Hives. There are many new developments planned that seek to ensure our looked after children have the right support at the right time with Foster Carers that are equipped to meet their needs. Resulting in improved Foster Carer satisfaction, retention, and recruitment.

REQUIRED CORPORATE AND LEGAL INFORMATION:

Links to the Strategic Plan

Hampshire maintains strong and sustainable economic growth and prosperity:	no
People in Hampshire live safe, healthy and independent lives:	yes
People in Hampshire enjoy a rich and diverse environment:	no
People in Hampshire enjoy being part of strong, inclusive communities:	yes

Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents

The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)

Document

Location

None

EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT:

1. Equality Duty

The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by or under the Act with regard to the protected characteristics as set out in section 4 of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation);
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (see above) and persons who do not share it.

Due regard in this context involves having due regard in particular to:

- The need to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
- Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

2. Equalities Impact Assessment:

This report is an information update for the Children and Young People Select Committee and therefore no impact has been identified.