

CORPORATE PARENTING SUB-COMMITTEE

Agenda Item 41

Brighton & Hove City Council

Subject:	Brighton and Hove Foster Carer Recruitment Process, Foster Carers' Charter, Changes to Housing Benefit Affecting Foster Carers		
Date of Meeting:	Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee 17.4.13		
Report of:	[Relevant Strategic Director]		
Contact Officer:	Name:	Andy Whippey, Service Manager, Children in Care	Tel: 29-5391
	Email:	Andy.whippey@brighton-hove.gov.uk	
Key Decision:	No		
Ward(s) affected:	All		

FOR GENERAL RELEASE

1. SUMMARY AND POLICY CONTEXT:

- 1.1 The majority of children in care are placed in foster homes. In Brighton and Hove 82 % (as of 31.1.13) were placed with foster carers (74% with foster carers and 8% with family and friends carers (nationally 75% children are placed with foster families). Foster carers play a key role in caring for children in care, providing secure, stable homes and ensuring that these children can reach their developmental potential. The need to find suitable foster families is an on-going issue. The recruitment of suitable new foster carers is a key target for the Brighton and Hove Fostering Service.
- 1.1.1 Brighton and Hove Fostering Service is not the only organisation operating locally who recruits foster carers. There are a number of Independent Fostering Agencies (I.F.A.'s) who also recruit local foster carers and hence there is strong competition for a limited number of people who are willing and able to become foster carers. Timely and effective recruitment is essential in attracting carers to foster for Brighton and Hove.
- 1.1.3 Following a unit cost exercise it was established that on average it is £184 per week cheaper to place a child with an in-house foster carer than with an I.F.A. carer, hence adding greater impetus to the need to recruit more foster carers for Brighton and Hove.
- 1.2.1 The Foster Carers' Charter was a government in April 2011. It was part of the move to improve outcomes for children and reflecting changes in legislation that recognised the role of the foster carer being of key importance. The Charter outlined a way that foster carers and the council and its members could work together in partnership. A secondary aim was for the Charter to be used one of the tools used in foster carer recruitment.
- 1.2.2 In 2012, Brighton and Hove Fostering Service in conjunction with its' foster carers and in consultation with other key parties produced a Brighton and Hove Foster Carers' Charter which laid out the values and expectations placed on both

foster carers and the local authority in working together and looking after children in care.

- 1.3.1 Changes to the housing benefit being introduced in April 2013 proposed that foster children would not be considered as permanent members of a household and hence leave foster carers claiming housing benefit penalised as they would be seen to have a spare room, the 'bedroom tax'.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 That the committee notes the Brighton and Hove foster care recruitment process.
- 2.2.1 That the committee notes and approves the Charter on behalf of the council so this can be adopted as a way of working between Brighton and Hove foster carers and the members of the council.
- 2.3 That the committee notes the updates to the proposals related to housing benefit that would affect foster carers claiming housing benefit.

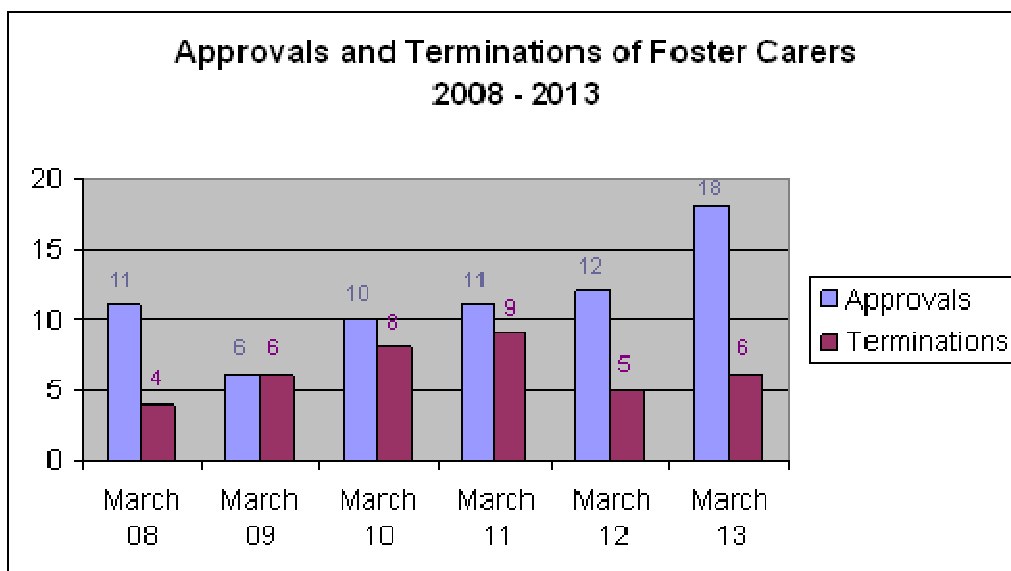
3. RELEVANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION/CHRONOLOGY OF KEY EVENTS:

Foster Carer Recruitment

- 3.1.1 Following monies from the council's Value for Money Project, the Fostering Service has formed a dedicated fostering recruitment team in March 2012. This development is in line with other local authorities. The team consists of a part time practice manager, 3 social workers (2.6 FTE) and a recruitment and publicity officer. This team is responsible for attracting potential foster carers, processing their applications and undertaking their assessment. Forming a dedicated team has enabled a more focussed approach to fostering recruitment and enabled the team to respond more quickly to fostering enquiries and undertake assessments more rapidly.
- 3.1.2 The service has a recruitment strategy which is updated regularly and uses a number of different marketing and advertising techniques. The recruitment strategy is based on practice guidance from Fostering Network, the U.K.'s leading fostering charity as well as local needs and experience about what works. Adverts are placed in a range of media publications. Recently more enquiries are coming from the internet. The recruitment website has been updated to respond to this trend. Word and mouth is also important as are 'good news stories' in the press. Fostering Network have estimated that it takes approximately 2 years from someone receiving a prompt to actually picking up the phone, but it can be longer. This can make it difficult to tally exactly what was the 'tipping point' that led the applicant to make the first call. The Fostering Service therefore operates a 'drip, drip' approach in terms of prompts to the public.
- 3.1.3 There are a number of I.F.A.'s operating locally. Hence it is important that Brighton and Hove can compete with these to attract foster carers. A brief bit of local research suggested that whilst some carers prefer to foster for private fostering agencies as believe they offer the best service, others prefer to foster

for the local authority as it fits with their views and they like the back up of the larger council. More recently Brighton and Hove has seen a significant interest from foster carers already working for I.F.A.'s wishing to transfer to Brighton and Hove. The reasons they have given for this are they believe they will have a greater choice/variety of children to foster and they view the support offered by Brighton and Hove to be better and more locally based. On average I.F.A. carers receive on average £50 - £70 per week more in fostering allowance. Foster carers do not feedback that they are making decisions based on finances and hence this is not a key factor in recruitment although carers may not choose to say they are fostering for money.

- 3.1.4 Fostering recruitment tries to reach a wide an audience as possible and invites people to enquire just for information without having to submit a full application. Information about fostering is provided on the website which has recently been updated, www.fosteringinbrightonandhove.org.uk. Information packs giving an oversight of fostering and what is required are sent to prospective applicants. On average the Fostering Service receives over 200 initial enquiries per year. Many of these go no further than making an initial call. Following an initial enquiry a member of the recruitment team will call the applicant back as soon as possible. Research suggests a prompt response at this stage is important. Experience demonstrates that some applicants decide to come back at a later date when their circumstances are right following an initial enquiry.
- 3.1.5 Much of fostering recruitment involves information giving, so prospective applicants can make an informed choice that fit with their circumstances. It also involves a degree of myth-busting such you can foster if you are married or single, gay and lesbian, with or without children. There is no upper age limit to become a foster carer as long as you are fit enough to foster. There are some parameters put in place such as needing to live within 20 miles of the borders of Brighton and Hove, applicants must have a spare room, they must have enough time to foster, no serious offences and have some childcare experience and knowledge. The nature of children in care and the behaviours they bring with them does mean that foster carers need to have what it takes to meet the needs of children coming into care.
- 3.1.6 There is a well-established recruitment process. Please see Appendix 1. In addition to giving applicants information there is a screening component so resources are not wasted on applicants that do not meet the requirements to become a foster carer. Common reasons for people not going forward relate to insufficient space in their home, fostering not being what they thought, it not fitting with their family circumstances.
- 3.1.7 The service receives approximately 200 initial enquiries per year. Over recent years the average number of carers going on to be approved has been in the range of 10 -11. Following the creation of the VFM recruitment Team the number of new carers approved for 2012/13 has risen to 18. Each year a number of carers (average 6-7) will cease to foster for a variety of reasons. In the last 10 months the overall number of fostering households has increased from 126 to 134. However prior to that the increase has been slow e.g. in 2007 there were 122 fostering households. There are 12 assessments underway currently.



3.1.8 With the creation of the dedicated recruitment team, the time from initial enquiry to the start of the assessment has been reduced to 6 months. This has brought Brighton and Hove more in line with the I.F.A.'s. Potential foster carers begin to make a firmer commitment to fostering at the time of the preparation course, which applicants need to complete if they are to go on to be assessed. The team has been able to double the number of preparation groups held within the year to 6, meaning there is a preparation group every 8 weeks reducing waiting time. It is following on from this, if both parties are satisfied that the home study starts. From the prep group 50% of applicants go on to be approved, 78.8% who start an assessment go on to be approved as foster carers.

3.1.9 The Fostering Service, in conjunction with most other local authorities and I.F.A.'s use the B.A.A.F. Fostering Assessment tool. This involves taking up a number of checks and references for safeguarding purposes as well as identifying foster carers strengths and weaknesses. In discussions with the foster carers the assessors establish the ages and numbers of children that the carers will be suitable to foster and type of fostering they wish to do e.g. short or long term. The maximum number of children that a foster carer can foster is 3. However most choose to initially be approved to foster one. This can present challenges in relation to the placing of sibling groups. Foster carers are often not confident at the beginning of their fostering career and prefer to foster one or sometimes two children initially. It has also been difficult to recruit foster carers to foster older children and most carers prefer to foster children under 10. The reasons for this relate to the poor public image of teenagers as well as not fitting with many foster carers who have their own children still at home. The assessors work hard to encourage foster carers to consider being approved for a wider range but this tends to come later into foster carers' careers when they have gained in confidence and experience. The majority of foster carers (80%) in the last year have been approved for children under 10 years of age. 2 carers have been approved for older children and 1 for parent and baby.

3.1.10 The Fostering service currently has 11 parent and baby carers although 5 of these are choosing not to take parent and baby placements currently and are doing other types of fostering. Demand for parent and baby placements outstrips supply. It is a very specialised area of fostering. It can be challenging work. It is

mostly court directed and although very rewarding when successful, it can be stressful and complicated having both an adult, who is often an unwilling party and not co-operative in the home as well as their baby. The service has had more success in amending carers' terms of approval to include parent and baby fostering once they have gained some fostering experience. The recruitment team promote parent and baby fostering right from the initial stages so seeds are planted for a later date. The Fostering Service offers a variety of support to the parent and baby carers and there is a very strong support group in operation. However some carers after a difficult placement may choose not to continue with this type of work or take a break.

The Brighton and Hove Foster Carers' Charter

- 3.2.1 The Charter was a government initiative was part of the move to improve outcomes for children and reflected changes in legislation which recognised the importance of the role of foster carers in looking after children. A subsidiary aim was for it to be used as a recruitment and retention tool. Fostering Network produced a sample charter for foster providers to use as the basis for producing their own. Brighton and Hove has in fact gone further than many other providers in producing a charter that reflects local circumstances and views including consultation with children in care and other interested parties (Appendix 2) . Many providers have replicated solely the sample charter provided by Fostering Network. Foster Carers' Charters are published on fostering agencies websites. Brighton and Hove's is therefore a stronger document reflecting more closely local views of interested parties.
- 3.2.2 Concern has been expressed about the Charter in that it places a greater emphasis on what is expected of the local authority rather than what is expected of the foster carers. One of the reasons for the Charter was redressing the balance with foster carers following government consultation with foster carers as well as a change in emphasis of their role recognised in legislation. This reflected the views of Brighton and Hove's foster carers who felt that they were often the last people to be consulted even though they were caring for children and at times were not treated with respect. It should be made clear that the expectations placed on foster carers are dealt with in other agreements and documents. Foster carers' performance is highly monitored and regulated (National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2011, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011). The aim of the Charter was more related to the recruitment and retention of foster carers.
- 3.2.3 Foster carers sign a 'Foster Care Agreement' at the time of their annual review which lays out in more detail the expectations placed upon them (Appendix 3). Each year foster carers have an Annual Review. This is a formal meeting which considers their previous year's work, their achievements and learning, whether their status as approved foster carers should continue and the terms of their continued approval. Any training needs are considered, and recommendations are made for the future. Feedback on the foster carers' performance is received from a number of different parties to ensure that foster carers are meeting expectations placed on them. These include the child, the child's social worker, Independent Reviewing Officers, birth parents and other professionals. Where there is a specific area where it is felt that foster carers fall below the standards of care expected of them, there is a set of procedures known as Standards of

Care, where complaints and allegations are investigated. The end result of a standard of care investigation could lead to changes in the terms of their approval or termination of their fostering approval. Data is provided to Ofsted annually of approvals and standards of care. In addition foster carers' performance is monitored at Child in Care Reviews as foster carers are frequently tasked with actions from the reviews.

Housing Benefit Changes Affecting Foster Carers

- 3.3.1 The most recent ministerial statement relating to foster carers and housing benefit implies that foster carers will be allowed 1 extra bedroom as a fostering household, hence will not experience a reduction in their Housing Benefit. This applies to all tenure types i.e. privately rented homes, Housing Associations and council accommodation. The Revenues and Benefit Team has worked with the Fostering Service to identify carers in receipt of housing benefit. These carers have been written to explain the situation. Foster carers who are in receipt of housing benefit within the city have been identified and exemptions for these will be applied for and these carers written to, to confirm this. The numbers involved are small.
- 3.3.2 If a foster carer has more than 1 bedroom used for fostering then the Revenue and Benefits Team are asking those foster carers to contact them. An application to the Discretionary Housing Payment Fund will need to be made to avoid the foster carer experiencing a shortfall in income. Foster carers have been informed of this by letter which makes it clear that Brighton and Hove City Council has agreed to pay the shortfall between rent and Housing benefit caused by the introduction of the size criteria in council and Housing Association tenancies for the full 52 week year. Foster carers claiming Housing Benefit from another council will need to contact them to find out their policy details.

4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CONSULTATION

- 4.1 Feedback is taken from throughout the fostering recruitment process from applicants about their experiences as to what has been helpful for them. All newly approved foster carers are asked for feedback about the process when they go to fostering panel and this is fed back to the fostering team. Foster carers and children in care are used as part of the recruitment process.
- 4.2 The production of the Brighton and Hove Charter involved a working party consisting of members of the Fostering Service and foster carers. Parties affected by the Foster Carers' Charter such as children in care and placing social workers views were sought and amendments incorporated.

5. FINANCIAL & OTHER IMPLICATIONS:

Financial Implications:

- 5.1.1 There are no financial recommendations associated with the recommendations of this report in terms of the committee noting the foster care recruitment process. There are financial recommendations associated with the Value for Money Foster Carer Recruitment project. These are being presented to the Child review Board held in May 2013.

David Ellis, Senior Accountant consulted 15.3.13

5.1.2 There are no financial implications for the introduction and implication of the Brighton and Hove Foster Carers' Charter.

David Ellis, Senior Accountant consulted 2.9.12 and 15.3.13.

5.1.3 For foster carers using one bedroom to foster there will be no financial implications related to the changes in Housing Benefit affecting foster carers as this policy has now been reversed in respect of foster carers.

5.1.4 For the small number of foster carers who use more than one bedroom for fostering they will experience a reduction in their housing benefit of 25%. They will be invited to apply to the Discretionary Housing Payment fund to make up this shortfall and if they do this they will not experience a reduction in income. The size of the D.H.P. in future years is uncertain. The carers likely to be affected by this are currently.

David Ellis, Senior Accountant consulted 15.3.13

Legal Implications:

5.2.1 The National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2011 places a duty on Fostering Services to recruit a range of foster carers to meet the needs of children they provide care. Ofsted inspects Fostering Service against Fostering Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. Brighton and Hove has been inspected by Ofsted in August 2012, including fostering recruitment and gave the service the rating of 'good'.

5.2.2 The National Minimum Standards for Fostering 2011 gave a greater emphasis to the role of the foster carers and the part they play in delivering improved outcomes for children in care. The standards see the foster carer as having a central and integral role in the care of children looked after. The Charter is viewed as part of the mechanism to ensure that foster carers receive the support they need to carry out their role. The Charter was reviewed as part of the Ofsted inspection in August 2011. The Charter provides a basis and framework for how the council works with foster carers to meet the minimum standards. The charter is part of the services offered to foster carers and gives a clear message of the value placed on foster carers and their role in achieving positive outcomes for children in care.

Lawyer Consulted: Name Andrew Pack, In-house advocate Date:05/04/13

"I agree with the legal position Summarised in the report and have no additional comments to make. "

Equalities Implications:

5.3 Providing high quality foster care is part of giving children the best start in life to help maximise their capabilities. Providing stable secure family homes that meet the needs of children, who are disadvantaged by suffering abuse or not able to live with their own families will work to reduce inequalities that these children face in later life. Increasing the number of fostering households and supporting those households will work to improve placement stability for children in care.

Sustainability Implications:

- 5.4 There are no immediate sustainability implications.

Crime & Disorder Implications:

- 5.5 High quality foster care is part of improving life chances for children who cannot live with their family and who have suffered abuse. The chance for children to engage in family life and form secure attachments with their care givers will aid young people in engaging in law abiding and socially acceptable behaviour. Both foster carer recruitment and the Charter relate to increasing the number of foster carers helping to give children in care a secure base from which to move into adult life and reducing the chances of involvement in crime and disorder.

Risk and Opportunity Management Implications:

- 5.6 Foster care is regarded as a preferable option for children who cannot live with their own families. Foster carer recruitment and the Foster Carers' Charter relates to improving outcomes for children by increasing the number of carers and providing a framework for the council to work with foster carers who are their main carers. This will have implications for reducing risk for children and young people.

Public Health Implications:

- 5.7 For children in foster care the opportunity for them to develop secure and lasting attachments with their foster carers will be a key factor in their on-going emotional health and well-being with implications for later life. Both foster carer recruitment and the Foster Carers' Charter aims to both increase the number and support existing foster carers in looking after children in care and aims to provide placement stability through working with their carers. Children coming into foster care see improvements in their health and foster carers play an integral role in this and ensuring these children have access to appropriate resources.

Corporate / Citywide Implications:

- 5.8.1 Foster carer recruitment fits with the council's priorities of giving children and young people the best start in life by increasing the choice of family placements. It also has implications via the Value for Money Programme as in house with in-house foster carers are recognised as better value for money compared with placing children with private fostering agencies.
- 5.8.2 The Foster Carers' Charter fits with the council's priorities of giving children and young people the best start in life by ensuring that the council works with its' foster carers to ensure they are supported in their task of looking after children in care. It is also a tool to be used in foster carer recruitment and assists with foster carer retention and demonstrating the council's commitment to supporting their foster carers with the challenging task of looking after children in care.

5.8.3 Foster carers with 2 bedrooms used for fostering will need to apply to The Discretionary Housing Premium fund along with other Brighton and Hove residents. The number of carers is small but it will be in competition and to a limited fund.

6. EVALUATION OF ANY ALTERNATIVE OPTION(S):

6.1.1 The Fostering Service's foster care recruitment strategy has been produced following advice both nationally and locally and experience built up over a number of years as to what works and is a culmination of a number of years work. The creation of a dedicated fostering recruitment team, following one years work has demonstrated advantages over the previous system where foster care recruitment was contained within the Fostering Team, alongside other work. The team have been able to increase the number of additional fostering households available.

6.1.2 The Foster Carers' Charter is a government initiative relating to working with foster carers who are an integral part of improving outcomes for children in care and Brighton and Hove's Foster Carer's Charter meets this obligation. Foster carers have reacted positively to the proposal and have worked to produce a charter that reflects issues facing local carers.

7. REASONS FOR REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Successful and timely foster carer recruitment is crucial for providing foster families for children who cannot live with their own families. Foster carers

7.2.1 The Brighton and Hove Foster Carers' Charter provides a way the council and foster carers can work together positively that respects the roles and requirements of each party.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Appendices:

1. Fostering Recruitment Workflow
2. Brighton and Hove Foster Carers' Charter
3. Foster Carer Agreement

