

NUMBERS OF CHILDREN IN CARE AND OTHER CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE INFORMATION

As at 18th January there were 337 children in care. The number has been steady at this level over the past quarter, but represents a rise across the year as a whole. This rise returns the borough to levels closer to those in similar authorities, following a period when the numbers of children in care was significantly lower than one would expect. It also reflects a continued rise in the number of children in care nationally. Recent national figures show that there are 4,000 more children in care in 2015 than there were in 2011, over 1,100 of whom are from the North West. This rise in the number of children in care also reflects changing demographics and larger numbers of children and young people in England.

The number of children subject to Child Protection Plans is 183 and 429 children have Child in Need plans. The number of open children's social care cases has reduced over the last month to 1440 and this remains much lower than its peak of 2034 in the winter of 2011/12.

21 children have been adopted since April 2015, and 29 children are placed in adoptive placements.

CHRISTMAS DONATIONS

There was a wonderful response from local people and business who donated gifts to help families in need and care leavers at Christmas. As well as donations from council staff, gifts were also received from PM+M Chartered Accountants, Ivy Street Community Centre, Argos, St Silas Church, St Bartholomew's Church, Church of the Saviour, Darwen Lions and Hollins Grove Congregational Church. It is heartening that so many people got involved to make the festive season a good time for as many children and young people as possible, who may have gone without save for this generosity.

OFSTED INSPECTION OF CHILDREN'S RESIDENTIAL HOMES

Three of the borough's residential children's homes received an annual Ofsted inspection during November and December. Both the Apple Trees short breaks facility for children and young people with disabilities and the Lytham Road Adolescent Support Unit (ASU) were judged 'outstanding' in all areas.

The ASU inspection report commented on 'highly effective support' provided by 'positive, enthusiastic and highly motivated staff'. In addition, the report concluded that the unit effectively promotes risk awareness with the young people the support.

The Whalley New Road residential home was judged 'good' in all areas with the inspector highlighting that staff were caring and nurturing. The inspector positively remarked that all the young people living at the home had an excellent education attendance record.

CELEBRATION EVENT FOR CHILDREN CENTRE VOLUNTEERS

In early December I, along with Cllr Pat McFall and the Chief Executive, attended a celebration event to acknowledge the contribution of 74 children's centre volunteers and present certificates of appreciation. The volunteering framework was introduced in 2012 and is open to adults who have an interest in supporting children's centres and the services they offer and want to gain work experience. The programme covers a variety of volunteering opportunities including children and parents groups, childcare, reception, catering and cleaning and where volunteers have interests outside of the centre, they are supported to access these opportunities.

GOVERNMENT REVIEW OF RESIDENTIAL CARE

Sir Martin Narey, has been appointed by the Department for Education to undertake a review of residential care for children and young people. The consultation, which ended in early January, will consider the purpose and role of residential care, what works to improve outcomes for children, and whether there are better alternatives for some children who are currently living in residential care. The review will also explore how improvements can be made to how residential care is commissioned, delivered, regulated and inspected.

The department has submitted a response to the consultation and a report is expected to be published in Spring 2016.

FOSTERING UPDATE

The Fostering Service continuously advertises for foster carers and in December visitors to Blackburn Market got the chance to learn more about fostering at the launch of the '*Picture Your Selfie Fostering*' campaign. A festive photo-booth encouraged shoppers to take fun 'selfies' wearing novelty hats and reindeer antlers and foster carers and the Fostering Service were on hand to answer questions.

Social media activity has been a success story for the service, with the dedicated Fostering Facebook page receiving over 20,000 views in one week during December with 11 enquiries from prospective foster carers coming directly from the site.

Thank you to the 122 fostering families who are caring for 134 children across the borough, a number of whom have been fostering for the local authority for over 40 years. The support, care and dedication that all foster carers give to our children is highly valued.

REGIONAL ADOPTION AGENCY UPDATE

I am delighted that Cindy Hunter, Assessment and Social Work Service Lead, has been appointed to the key position of Regional Manager of the newly formed Regional Adoption Agency. This is a secondment position until 31st March 2016. This newly formed agency will bring together six of the region's best performing adoption agencies from the statutory and voluntary sectors to form a single regional agency to deliver improved outcomes for children who need adoptive parents.