

EXECUTIVE BOARD DECISION



REPORT OF: Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education

LEAD OFFICERS: Director of Children's Services & Education

DATE: 10th December 2020

PORTFOLIO(S) AFFECTED: Children, Young People and Education

WARD/S AFFECTED: (All Wards);

KEY DECISION: N

SUBJECT:

Fostering Service Report for Quarter 1 and 2 – April to September 2020

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides information on the management and performance of the Local Authority's Fostering Service and is revised each quarter. This report alongside Appendix 1, provides analysis of the period April to September 2020, and reflects upon data and any patterns within the Service to determine development and progress. This report also outlines how the Service has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Executive Board notes the Fostering Service Report for Quarters 1 and 2, alongside the Appendix 1 report for further Service delivery information.

3. BACKGROUND

The Fostering Service Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services requires that the Council Executive:

- a) Receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the Fostering Service every 3 months;
- b) Monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children;
- c) Satisfy themselves that the provider is complying with the conditions of registration.

The report has been written to address the areas identified above. It will be taken into account by OFSTED when inspecting the service.

The report is both Quarter 1 and 2 covering the period from 1st April to 31st September 2020 and provides a comprehensive overview of the service. Both Quarter reports have been combined on this occasion to reflect the impact of the pandemic initially upon the Service, alongside developments in Quarter 2.

2. KEY ISSUES & RISKS

This report and Appendix 1 outlines how the Fostering Service responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of Service delivery and implementing new, virtual methods of working with foster carers, while supporting placements at this vulnerable time. Appendix 2 also highlights the Covid Risk Assessment adhered to throughout this period.

Placement stability in Quarter 1 remained consistent, and the anticipated placement disruption was not observed within this period. The number of children and young people placed in-house saw an increase, alongside the proportion of family and friends placements. The general consensus and explanation for this was felt to be a sense of resilience and commitment from foster carers, to maintain children and young people in their care, at a time of uncertainty and school absence for many.

Children in our Care Teams, Fostering and Safeguarding Teams worked collaboratively to 'RAG' rate placements in order of priority for additional support and enhanced communication with foster carers to offer stability. The priority risk assessments for children, young people and foster carers/residential carers continues to date throughout the pandemic. (Appendix 2) The Independent Reviewing Officers also had oversight and input into placement stability, offering emotional support to our children and young people, and working with Children's Services to provide an enhanced support plan in this time of need.

Placement visits and assessment visits continued throughout the lockdown period and continue to be undertaken for the most vulnerable placements, alongside additional support from REVIVE from a therapeutic and emotional well-being perspective. A large proportion of virtual support visits and calls were maintained, certainly for those foster carers who were shielding or at higher risk. The Fostering Service increased support calls for those who requested them, or were risk assessed as requiring such support.

Quarter 2 saw the start of more placement instability, and some disruptions with both fostering and residential placements. This was anticipated at the point of children and young people returning to school, and also as a result of the longevity of the pandemic and its impact. There has been an increase in Quarter 2 with Agency placements being required, but most important to note is that the availability of foster placements saw a reduction possibly as a result of foster carers on a national scale isolating, feeling anxious about accepting new placements and also the age of many of our foster carers placing them in the vulnerable category. Placement instability therefore saw an increase in this Quarter, but also placement sufficiency was hugely impacted. Some children were delayed at the very start of the pandemic in moving to their adoptive families for a period of time, and in turn this held up foster placements that were anticipated to become available for other children.

The impact of Covid-19 has had a significant impact upon the more typical methods of engagement and participation, towards virtual methods with children and young people. While this works for many, there is still a cohort of children and young people who prefer face to face interaction and feel that virtual or telephone communication does not work for them. The VOICE group is taking place and the attendees have been asked to assist with looking at 'what a Corporate Parent should look like' and also helping the REVIVE Team to consider a relaunch and new name. Where risk assessed and possible, some groups have taken place face to face, to promote engagement with young people.

Foster Carer recruitment remains a challenge, and on a national scale, even more so during the pandemic. Quarter 2 saw the Service objective of maintaining digital advertising with a community presence. The bus stop campaigns brought in some interest, and Q2 promoted a new 'Lets Foster'

billboard to ensure a presence in the community to link in with the bus stop promotion and radio advert which are all current. The billboards are in place for 12 months and will be regularly refreshed.

Recruitment and Retention of foster carers remains the primary focus of the Service while working creatively with colleagues and providers to achieve greater placement sufficiency in the Borough due to the limited placement options available at this time. A Foster Carer payment enhancement is also being considered alongside this report to further support foster carers for Blackburn with Darwen and to remain as competitive in the recruitment market as we can be.

Blackburn with Darwen are working collaboratively with the DfE and Outcomes UK, with Lancashire, Cumbria and Blackpool as part of a 'SEED' funding bid for which a second grant has been awarded. The objective is to work as a North West cohort to address issues of recruitment, retention, how placements are commissioned in our area and also digital recruitment campaigns. This is an exciting opportunity and one which aims to enhance the number of in-house foster carers in the Borough.

3. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

No Policy implications have been identified.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Fostering Budgets are closely monitored as part of the regular portfolio review. The financial pressures facing the Children, Young People and Education portfolio as a whole have been recognised by the Council and a cash limit increase of £1.8m has been approved by Executive Board in order to address the predicted overspend.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

No legal implications identified.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

No additional resource implications.

6. EQUALITY AND HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Please select one of the options below.

Option 1 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) not required – the EIA checklist has been completed.

Option 2 In determining this matter the Executive Member needs to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision.

Option 3 In determining this matter the Executive Board Members need to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision.

7. CONSULTATIONS

None

8. STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE

The recommendations are made further to advice from the Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer has confirmed that they do not incur unlawful expenditure. They are also compliant with equality legislation and an equality analysis and impact assessment has been considered. The recommendations reflect the core principles of good governance set out in the Council's Code of Corporate Governance.

9. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

All Declarations of Interest of any Executive Member consulted and note of any dispensation granted by the Chief Executive will be recorded in the Summary of Decisions published on the day following the meeting.

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DATE:	03/12/20
BACKGROUND PAPER:	Appendix 1 Fostering Report Appendix 2 Risk Assessment