

Item No. 8.	Classification: Open	Date: 17 July 2013	Meeting Name: Corporate Parenting Committee
Report title:		Progress Report in Respect of Fostering Recruitment	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		Looked After Children by the London Borough of Southwark	
From:		Strategic Director of Children's and Adults' Services	

RECOMMENDATION

1. Members to note the information provided in this report.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. Members will be aware that there has been a national increase in the numbers of Looked After Children over the last five years. This has placed pressure on fostering resources as the increase in fostering households has tried to keep pace with the demand for placements and many local authorities have been forced to place children with foster carers provided by Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs).
3. Commissioning external placements has financial implications for the council as they are an expensive resource often costing double that of in-house placements. There are also implications for children in terms of placement choice as most IFAs are often outside of the borough. Looked After Children may have to leave their community, which could potentially mean a change of school and loss of contact with friends in addition to family. This can be difficult for children to cope with and in some cases lead to placement instability, which has long been associated with poorer outcomes for children.

Core Business

4. The fostering team's core business as part of Children's Services is to:
 - provide quality foster care placements for Southwark's Looked After Children.
 - recruit, assess, train and support a suitable and diverse range of foster carers to provide quality care and placement choice for Looked After Children.
5. There were 565 Looked After Children in Southwark at 31/3/13. The fostering team were able to place 267 (62%) of these children in Southwark fostering households, while 133 (31%) were placed with IFA foster carers. Family and Friends placement accounted for 32 (7%) of placements.
6. Southwark foster carers are members of the Southwark Foster Carers Association who meet regularly consider issues such as training,

foster carer payments, and overall quality of provision. The Association meets regularly with senior managers in the department and the Executive Member for Children's Services, to ensure that the foster carer voice can be heard and that close working relationships are maintained.

7. Southwark had a cohort of 145 fostering households at 31 March 2013, who are reviewed on an annual basis. Southwark also has an ageing population of foster carers, some of whom will be retiring over the next few years. The recruitment process is therefore the most critical part of the fostering service if it is to meet the diverse needs of Looked After Children now and in the future.

Foster Carer Recruitment

8. Southwark's recruitment team consists of a recruitment manager supported by an administrator and a marketing officer who is responsible for the recruitment campaign. The recruitment manager is responsible for interviewing all prospective carers at the point of application and if successful will pass their details to one of three independent organisations whose social workers will complete the full fostering assessment.
9. Assessments usually take between 5-8 months to complete and delays can take place as a result of the number of statutory checks that are required. For example CRB (now DBS) checks and personal and professional references can take several weeks to complete. Feedback from prospective carers withdrawing from the assessment process has suggested they find the assessment too long and protracted. The new recruitment process will minimise delays by ensuring checks are undertaken quickly and progressed monitored.
10. There were a total of 151 initial enquiries between 2012/13, leading to 63 application forms, 29 of which progressed to the next stage of assessment. While it is positive to receive a high number of applications, careful screening is essential to ensure that only suitable candidates progress through to full assessment and approval. The service continues to apply high standards through the quality assurance process and oversight of the independently chaired fostering panel.

Additional Factors

11. Although Southwark has a large fostering resource it is important to maintain recruitment to replace natural turnover. Checks and references can take time to be processed as they require careful monitoring. An administrator has been appointed specifically to process the applications and manage the checks so that unnecessary delay can be avoided.
12. While the above factors have contributed to fewer approvals within the 12 month period foster carers who were approved, including Family and Friends and Family Link carers led to 25 placements for children. Family Link carers provide respite care for disabled children.
13. The need to recruit more foster carers resulted in the decision to commission a specialist recruitment agency with a proven track record of recruiting a large number of carers for a neighbouring authority. At this time it is the only agency carrying out such a bespoke service.

14. The agency offers a complete service from initial enquiry to delivering the completed assessment to Southwark for quality assurance within a shorter timescale while maintaining quality.
15. Over the next 12 months the agency has been tasked with recruiting a pool of 50 foster carers living in and within reasonable distance of Southwark who will have the skills and qualities to meet the diverse needs of Looked After Children. They will be expected to increase the number of enquiries through their marketing campaign and reduce the time from initial enquiry to approval.
16. The agency has a well developed marketing campaign which includes media advertising, leaflet drops and bus adverts travelling within and outside of the borough. They also attend job fairs and hold regular information sessions. All enquiries are followed up within 24 hours and as they complete all statutory checks and references they can begin the assessments almost immediately.
17. The agency will deliver a 3 day Skills to Foster training on a bi-monthly basis and their assessors are all trained social workers who can arrange appointments during evenings and weekends to suit all applicants. Southwark's recruitment manager will contribute to recruitment events, the Skills to Foster training and will also be responsible for the final quality assurance to ensure all reports are fit for purpose before being presenting to Southwark's fostering panel.
18. Monthly performance reports on all recruitment activity will be provided and the agency directors will attend quarterly management meetings to review the strategy.
19. Southwark has provided the agency with all relevant practice information including current and emerging areas of need in terms of our Looked After Children.

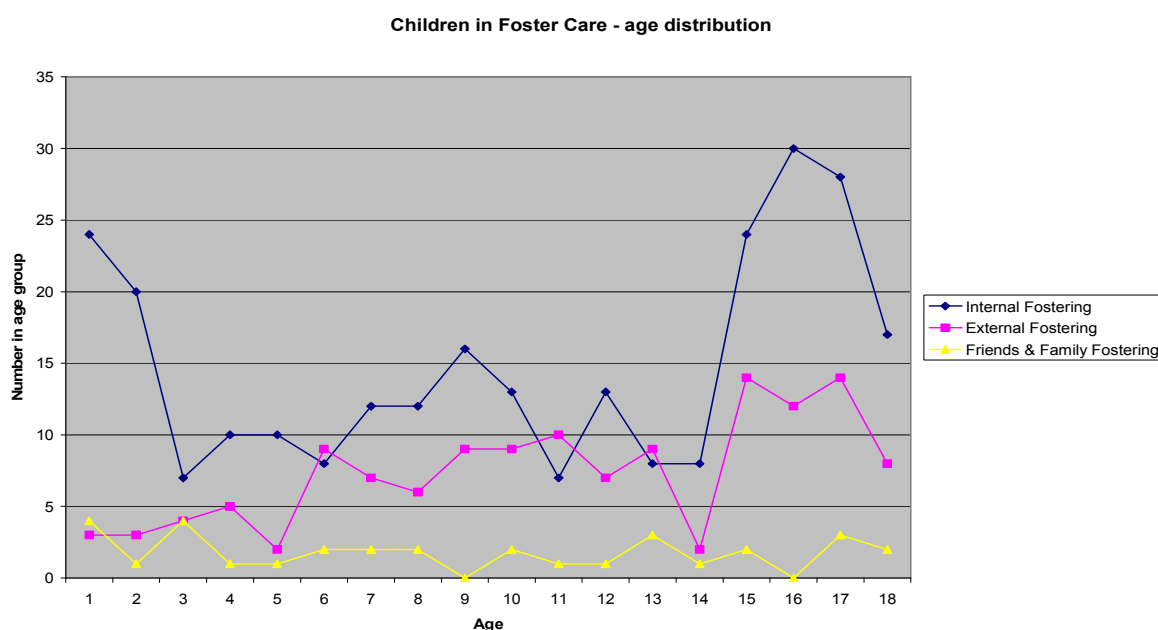
Placement Priorities

20. The current priorities are:
 - Increase our pool of 0 - 4 and 11- 15 year old placements
 - Increase the number of white carers to meet the needs of children waiting for a family
 - Develop options for Young People to be placed with Remand Carers instead of being received into the care of a residential placement, which may be hundreds of miles away
 - Increase permanent placements for individual and sibling groups
 - Increase the number of carers able to care for Looked After Children with disabilities.
21. Southwark intend to create anonymised profiles of children placed with IFA foster carers who are waiting for long term placements. These will be shared with current and new foster carers who have had significant child care experience and wish to foster on a permanent basis. Once new carers are approved these children can be matched and placed in line with their care plans.

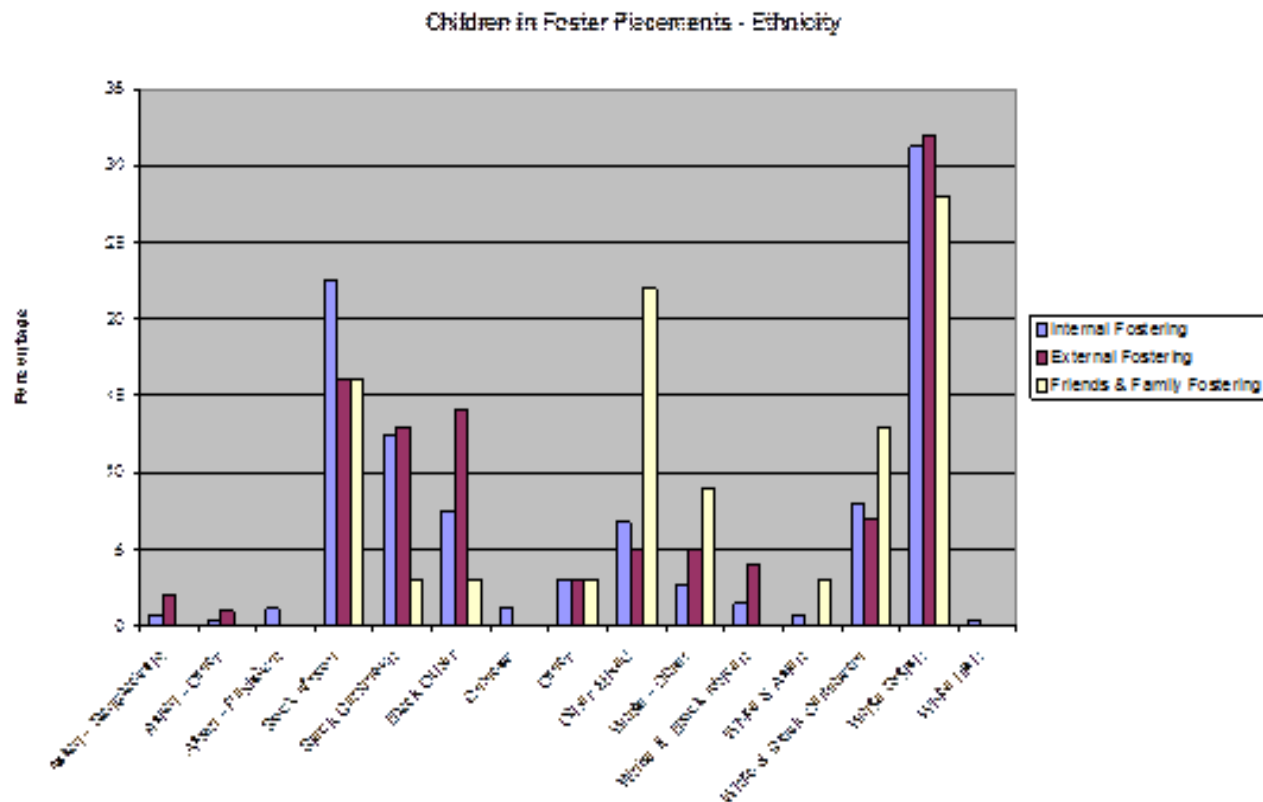
KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

22. The average weekly cost of placing a child with an IFA foster carer is more than

double that of an in-house placement. For example an average placement for an 11-15 year old in an IFA placement is £925, while an in-house placement is £358. Placing one Looked After Child in this age range with an in-house foster carer could produce savings of £29,484 over 52 weeks. There are 14 Looked After Children placed with IFA foster carers in this age range.



23. Internal foster carers provide care for 62% of all children placed in foster care with a significantly higher proportion throughout the age range. 77% of children aged 0-1, and 70% of all 16 year olds are placed internally. External foster carers provide care for a slightly higher proportion of 6, 11 and 13 year olds compared with the other two groups. Figures for Family and Friends carers remain fairly consistent throughout the age range.



24. While the majority of white British and black African and Caribbean children are placed with internal foster carers, a higher number of white British children are placed externally. The recruitment of white foster carers is now a priority for the service.

Future Developments

25. The fostering service is planning to develop a pool of more experienced foster carers to become specialist Parent & Child carers. This will mean that vulnerable parents can be assessed and supported within the borough rather than being placed in expensive residential placements outside of the borough. It will also enable carers to continue to support the parent and child for a short period following their transition back into the community.
26. The service is also exploring the possibility of recruiting foster carers wishing to adopt babies or very young children (concurrent carers). The foster carer would care for the child during the parent's assessment and go on to adopt if the assessment proves unsuccessful. This will prevent additional disruption for very young children.

Policy implications

27. There are no policy implications.

Community impact statement

28. Southwark fostering service gives due consideration to race, gender, disability, culture, religion and sexual orientation in relation to children being placed and adults applying to become foster carers, throughout the recruitment, assessment, and training process. Children in care are some of the most vulnerable children in the community, so an effective, high quality service is critical to ensuring positive outcomes.

Resource implications

29. The recruitment agency will be paid by results, therefore it is anticipated that the substantial savings resulting from Looked After Children's placements with in-house foster carers will more than meet the cost of the contract, however half of the overall cost will be taken from the fostering recruitment budget.
30. An increase in the number of in-house foster carers will require an increase in social work support. The service will use the current staffing to support new carers, but should the campaign prove as successful as anticipated, an additional 2 social workers would be needed to support the new foster carers. This will be funded from savings arise from the reduction in use of independent fostering agencies.

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

31. The director of legal services and strategic director of finance and corporate services noted the content of the Gateway report, containing information about the recruitment agency contract and therefore no further advice has been sought.

Head of Procurement

32. The recruitment agency's contract was overseen by procurement and therefore the process and contract were noted.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
None		

APPENDICES

No.	Title
None	

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Rory Patterson, Director, Children’s Social Care		
Report Author	Shirley Walker, Interim Service Manager		
Version	Final		
Dated	8 July 2013		
Key Decision?	No		
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER			
Officer Title		Comments Sought	Comments Included
Director of Legal Services		No	No
Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services		No	No
Cabinet Member		No	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team			8 July 2013