

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee
Fostering sub-group spotlight review

Executive summary

Nationally, and Lancashire is no different, Local Authorities struggle to recruit enough foster parents for placing children into suitable foster care without recourse to using Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) which means significant added costs to councils.

With the ultimate aim of exploring how to increase the number of foster parents in Lancashire registering through the County Council's own fostering service, the 'Promoting Fostering' sub-group was set up with a very specific remit of exploring what added-value County Councillors and partner organisations of the County Council could bring to the County Council's existing strategy to recruit foster carers: It was agreed to explore specifically.

1. How to increase the reach of the County Council's fostering promotion by using existing communication channels more effectively with other organisations and using the leverage of the County Council as a major public sector organisation in the county.
2. What information and data the county has about the characteristics/ demographic profile of current foster parents and whether foster care promotion can be targeted more effectively using the channels identified above.

Background and what promotion currently takes place

A number of facts were explored by the sub group at the outset that provided members with an understanding of what promotional activities took place and the challenges currently faced in the recruitment of foster carers. These included:

- People that want to foster think about it an average of 2 years before progressing to apply and therefore a 'drip feed' continual approach to promotion needs to take place to maintain their interest and enthusiasm.
- It was evident that to gauge how successful a specific promotional activity is data should be collected and analysed, as far as possible per activity, on
 - how many people make an initial enquiry
 - how many progress
 - how many succeed
 - what is the timescale from start to finish
- The comprehensive data available within the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) is used within the development of Lancashire's foster carer recruitment strategy - to profile the characteristics of a foster parent.
- The group with the greatest need for foster carers are teenagers and large sibling groups
- The County Council currently uses Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) and the split between children placed in an LCC foster home and with an agency foster carer is approximately 50/50 – around 500 children each

- Due to feedback on the interpretation of the role and people's motivations for becoming a foster carer the council has moved away from marketing it as 'the best job in the world'
- A National 'Fostering Fortnight' is in May – other times of focused promotion take place in September and January. This is often a campaign including radio, bus ads and billboards.
- Social media is used to promote fostering and a Facebook campaign is already underway
- It was suggested that the most advantageous geographical area to increase foster carers would be the central area of Lancashire as this potentially increased the opportunity to place children from anywhere in the county, although no foster family would be refused based on location.
- Anecdotal evidence from the sub group suggested that the process of becoming a foster carer in with the County Council took too long and there were concerns that this could have an adverse effect on the reputation of the service. Members wondered if the feedback indicated issues around communication and how the council keeps in touch with prospective foster carers during the process rather than the length of time it takes.
- Obviously foster carers may leave the authority over time and all opportunities need to be explored to ensure that comprehensive feedback is gathered and any lessons learnt from people's experiences of the service are taken on board to improve future activity.
- There are currently few measures undertaken to publicly thank or reward foster carers, particularly those with long service and this could be a development that would improve retention as well as be used to promote the service to potential new foster carers.
- It was also evident to members that the quality and quantity of information available to people interested in becoming a foster carer is very important as it needs to provide encouragement whilst clearly defining the basic criteria required to progress.
- Lancashire has the lowest marketing and promotion budget amongst councils in the North West which presents challenges to the team when considering how to maximise impact and achieve value for money.
- Targeted marketing already takes place using demographic data and focuses on middle income families and above (45-55 age group)
- Every opportunity to promote good news stories was taken and recent press coverage included celebrating the long service of a local foster carer
- The Fostering Service and the Communications teams both take on different roles of promoting the County's fostering service.

Methodology

1. Members of the group contacted a sample range of organisations to ask whether in principle they could help promote Lancashire Fostering Services to either their members of staff or members of the public, without incurring a cost to LCC. They were asked:

- What would they, as an organisation, need to promote foster caring with the Council amongst their staff and/or their public;
 - How would they do it (e.g. noticeboards, newsletters, payroll slips etc).;
 - What information would they need from the Council – e.g. a sample advert or a sentence to put in staff newsletters for on line communication, OR posters hard copy if to be displayed
2. Members also met with Communications team to determine current practices
 3. Members shared personal experiences and anecdotal evidence

Findings

How our partners can help

The County Council has multiple partners that support and/or deliver services either on behalf of, or in conjunction with the authority and this network of organisations provides opportunities to share messages that the Council wish to promote. These organisations include public, private and the voluntary, community and faith sectors.

Members of the sub group contacted a range of organisations and determined a number of different ways in which they were willing to support the promotion of foster carers

- District Councils within Lancashire have established mechanisms to share information with both their staff and residents and early conversations with a couple of local authorities indicated that they would happily promote the role of a foster carer.
- There are approximately 600 schools within the county and many, if not all, produce newsletter and other communications for staff and parents. Brief discussions with a couple of primary schools proved very promising and feedback indicated that if they were provided with a template of the information to be shared they would consider including it within their existing methods.
- Union representatives contacted also provided an encouraging response to disseminating information amongst their membership
- Lancashire Police also, in a similar vein to schools, were willing to share the promotion of foster carers amongst their staff through their internal communications.
- Private organisations and the VCFS who had been contacted also expressed their support in ways to help the distribution of promotion material and messages through their own network of staff and other partners
- A number of other key partner organisations were suggested by the sub group but have not been contacted or a response has not been received and these include the NHS, Parish and Town councils and local Universities
- During their discussions the sub group suggested many other organisations based with the county who could potentially assist with the promotion of fostering and various ways in which these could be engaged with included:
- Maximising the role of the Local Enterprise Partnership – with a view to accessing businesses such as Booths

- Local Chambers of Commerce – possible discussions about how local businesses could contribute to the development and sponsorship of annual awards for foster carers to acknowledge their vital contribution.
- Businesses known to public support fostering – e.g. Timpson's

The role of County Councillors

Many County Councillors have their own website and/or produce information leaflets or newsletters for their local constituents which include information relating to council services. The sub group identified this as another potential structure to exploit for additional promotion at no cost.

It was also considered that in light of the forthcoming County elections opportunities to expound on the role of councillors as corporate parents and in promoting fostering services recruitment could be included with the Induction programme that is provided to all new councillors.

What other authorities do

The websites and online information of other county councils was investigated and whilst identifying that different authorities approached the promotion and explanation of fostering slightly differently it was clear that common messages and themes were shared. A couple of authorities were then contacted and discussions took place with officers to highlight their key attributes for successful and consistent promotion. Conversations were had with North Yorkshire & Oxfordshire and their and other council's feedback included:

- They tend to use radio adverts rather than in the papers
- Most success with social media – lots of followers on Facebook. Very cheap way of communicating with people who are interested.
- Get lots of good news stories out in the media
- Rural areas – lots of farmers, linked up with Farmers Union to promote the service and Yorkshire Post did a double page spread (for free) on Farmers as Fosterers
- Use local tourist railways – special trips for foster carers and children – press opportunity, again the use of good news stories.
- Don't focus on 'campaigns' too much – instead find continual approach is more successful
- Feel the need to raise the profile of the service first – make sure everyone knows about you, then carry out promotional activities
- Feel it's important to not have too much information on the website – ask people to complete an enquiry form then they can have a personal approach to finding out more
- Do more general rather than targeted promotion
- Take a whole system approach – looking at front end prevention
- Microsites usually look and work more like the IFA websites – as opposed to having all the information within the main council website
- Fostering Friendly campaign to engage with local employers to encourage them to sign up to be fostering friendly i.e. support foster carers in their organisation and also to help raise our profile.

- IFA's tend to advertise a lot online, they do also some advertising in local newspapers and have done some short campaigns on the radio.
- Subtly broadcast the message that fostering with the council as opposed to an IFA is that working for the local authority you are fostering local children with a local community of other foster carers receiving local support and local training on a not-for-profit basis.
- Specific promotional material such as car stickers had been identified as a complimentary addition to bus adverts – the sub group felt this was an example of an opportunity to offer staff a simple way to participate.

Recommendations

1. That officers both within the Fostering and Adoption Team and Communications Team take forward the initial responses from partner organisations who have shown willingness to help; and building on the enquiries undertaken by the sub group, produce a revised communication and promotion plan to be presented to the Committee at its meeting in April.
2. In order to both improve retention and promote of Lancashire's fostering service, the possibility of hosting regular (annually or less frequent) networking events, 'awards for long service ceremonies' or 'thank you' events for existing foster parents is explored, and whether such events could be sponsored by local businesses.

Acknowledgements

The sub group during its existence received input from a number of different members of the Committee and officers and CC Dowding as Chair of the Committee offered her thanks for their support and assistance. Additionally it was acknowledged that many organisations helped to provide the sub group with valuable information to enable them to reach a conclusion and recommendation. These organisations included:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fostering & Adoption Team • Communications Team • Lancaster City Council • Rossendale Borough Council • Dallas Road Community Primary School • Sodexo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lancashire Police • British Red Cross • UCLAN • National Union of Teachers • North Yorkshire County Council • Oxfordshire County Council
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