

## **Fostering and Adoption Report to Children's Services Scrutiny Committee**

### **Report from Barbara Bath, Head of Youth Justice, Fostering, Adoption and Residential Services**

**Monday 22 August 2016**

**Subject** - Fostering and Adoption Services

**Purpose** – To inform members of Children's Services Scrutiny Committee of the services delivered by Fostering & Adoption in Lancashire

The Fostering & Adoption service is a Countywide service providing a range of functions including; marketing and recruitment of foster carers and adoptive parents, assessment of carers, support to approved foster carers, post adoption support, step parent adoptions, inter county adoptions.

#### **Marketing and Recruitment**

The fostering & adoption recruitment team work alongside the comms team in developing and implementing a yearly marketing and recruitment strategy for both fostering and adoption. Recruitment of adopters is less challenging and more consistent whilst recruitment of foster carers is perhaps more challenging nationally as well as locally.

Typically there are three media recruitment drives throughout the year, being February, May and September. These can include billboards, radio and advertising on buses.

Alongside these events, foster carers and staff promote the service at local events, fairs, in shopping centres and shops.

Previously the 23 North West authorities have come together to promote fostering for a local authority in the 'You Can Foster' campaign. This campaign was supported by grant funding and the high level TV publicity proved very successful.

Fostering is a competitive market with many independent agencies setting up in the North West to offer fostering placement.

#### **Assessment and Approval of Carers**

The fostering and adoption recruitment and assessment team undertake assessments in respect of:-

- Mainstream foster carers – these are foster carers who will look after Children Looked After age 0-18 years, who have not previously been known to them. Not all carers will look after children of all ages; some will be more suited to

school age children whilst others who are home full time may have a preference to care for babies.

- Connected Carers – these are carers put forward to look after a specific child already known to them. Most connected carers are related to the child but they could also be a family friend or professional who knows the child. Connected carers are only approved to look after the named child.
- Concurrent carers – are given dual approval as both foster carers and adopted carers. This enables young children who are considered unlikely to be rehabilitated home the opportunity to be placed with foster carers who will, if needed, go on to adopt them if they are unable to go home. Concurrent carers must be prepared to work with parents to support a child returning home if that is the plan. They likewise must commit to adoption if that is the plan at the conclusion of court proceedings.
- Fostering 4 Adoption – these carers are assessed and approved as adoptive carers, but also meet the assessment criteria as foster carers. Where a child has a local authority agreed plan of adoption, but the court has not yet awarded a Placement Order, the child can be placed under a Fostering 4 Adoption arrangement. The carers initially taking the child under fostering regulations will then go on to adopt the child. Fostering 4 Adoption carries more risks that the child could be moved from the carers than adoption does, as at the time of placement the court have not agreed the adoption plan.
- Adoption – applicants are assessed and approved as adoptive parents. Once an adoption order is granted the adopters are awarded the rights and responsibilities of any parent.
- Step parent adoption – the adoption of a partner's child.
- Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) – are currently assessed by Childrens Social Care. It is planned for these assessments to transfer to the fostering and adoption service. The team is currently being recruited to.

All assessments are concluded with a recommendation to approve or not. The cases are then presented to either the fostering or adoption panel where a recommendation is made. Panels consist of professionals from different disciplines as well as lay people with experience or interest in fostering or adoption. The conduct and membership of panels is governed by legislation.

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) will review all paperwork along with the recommendation from the panel before making a decision.

Applicants have a right to appeal the decision via an Independent Review Mechanism.

## **Foster Care Support**

All approved foster carers have an allocated social worker. Support and supervision of foster carers is governed by legislation, there is a minimum supervision requirement, requirement for ongoing training and evidence of development. Fostering households must meet a minimum health and safety requirement and

annual checks are conducted. All approved foster carers have an annual reviews – chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer. Support to foster carers is provided; directly by the allocated social worker, regular foster carer support groups, training events, annual PDRs, both announced and unannounced supervision visits, being allocated a 'buddy'.

Foster carers are all provided with a boarding out allowance for each child they look after. This is a set rate determined by the Government as a basic rate required to provide for the care needs of the child. Carers can receive an additional allowance on the tier payment scheme, but to do so they must provide evidence at their annual review of their training, commitment to the young person and service.

Foster carers look after children 0-18 years, additionally we have parent and child placements and 'Staying Put' arrangements. Staying Put arrangements enable a young person to remain supported in their foster placement post 18 years.

### **Post Adoption Support**

All adoptive parents and children have a right to request an assessment for post adoption support. The social workers allocated to undertake these assessments are based in the Support to Permanence teams. Post assessment support can either be provided directly from the team, or may be commissioned from a specialist.

There is currently a national Post Adoption Support fund from which finance can be accessed to pay for more specialist provision.

There is a vast continuum of post adoption support – from locally run peer support groups to psychological or psychiatric interventions.

It can be apparent prior to adoption that a child and family will need support either at the onset of placement or later in the child's life. Post adoption support needs are considered in all cases prior to a child being formally matched with their adoptive parents.

Adoptive families can receive an adoption allowance. The allowances have recently been reviewed and are dependent on the child meeting the criteria to warrant an allowance and the parents being means tested.

Other post adoption support services include; mailbox contact, direct contact, birth records. All adopted children remain the responsibility of the placing authority for 3 years in respect of any support. Post 3 years they become the responsibility of the authority where they reside.

### **Supporting Carers of Children and Young People Looked After Together (SCAYT+)**

SCAYT+ provides therapeutic support to carers and adoptive parents and also provide some therapeutic support directly to children and young people. The service

is managed within fostering and adoption and provides some of the post adoption support services.

### **Children Awaiting Adoption (CAA)**

The Children Awaiting Adoption team hold case responsibility for children who have an agreed plan of adoption. They are responsible for all statutory duties in regards to the children as CLA. The team must ensure each child is prepared for an adoptive placement. All children must have a Life Story Book and a Later Life letter. The Life Story book should tell their story in an age appropriate way with regards to each child's history; who has been important to them, to help them understand their birth family and their past and why they are adopted. The later life letter is written by someone who knows the child and their story well, usually the social worker.

Older children may often need direct work to help them understand and prepare them for their forever family. The Children Awaiting Adoption team work closely with a child's foster carers in preparing them for adoption.

Social Workers in the CAA team identify adopters for the child. For some children there will be a limited pool of adopters. Sibling groups, older children and children with complex needs are harder to find families for. The formal 'match' of child and adopter is presented to the adoption panel for a recommendation, following which the ADM will make the decision. The transfer of a child from their foster home to adoptive family is the 'Bridging Process' and is planned and monitored by the CAA Social Worker.

Social workers within the CAA team continue to hold statutory responsibility until the Adoption order is granted by the court.

Birth parents have the right to apply to contest an adoption until the Adoption Order is granted, following which all rights as parents are revoked.

### **Challenges for the Service**

One of the most significant challenges is sufficiency, particularly in respect of foster carers but also for the more challenging to place children in adoption. The population of CLA has increased significantly whilst the number of available foster carers approved by Lancashire has not.

There are a number of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) operating within Lancashire, who have well-tuned marketing strategies in place and attractive payments to entice applicants to apply to foster with them.

The cost of an IFA is approximately twice that of a local authority placement. This in the context of a national shortage of foster carers makes recruiting in Lancashire a challenge.

The fostering and adoption service has progressed 240 adoptions in the past 2 years and has reduced the length of time children wait for an adoptive home. Some children still wait too long though. These children are more likely to be older children, siblings groups and complex needs children.

### **Suggestions for Children's Services Scrutiny**

Could the County Council use its resources to support fostering recruitment, advertisement and promotion?

As above, using the range of resources in the County Council to promote adopting the more challenging to place children?