

REPORT TO: Children Young People & Education scrutiny Panel

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REPORT TITLE: Fostering and Permanence Service

REPORT AUTHOR/S:

Debbie Michael, Fostering & Permanence Service Manager

Email: Debbie.Michael@enfield.gov.uk

Telephone: 020 8132 0356

PURPOSE OF REPORT:

This report updates the Scrutiny Panel on the work of the Fostering and Permanence Services since September 2019, in line with the statutory requirement that Members receive regular reports on the work of these Services. There are two comprehensive Appendices to this report, these are the Annual Panel Reports from the statutory fostering and adoption panels and provide further details of the work of these services. These Appendices provide the performance information relating to the recruitment of foster carers and adopters, as well as the granting of Court Orders relating to children placed with adopters and special guardians.

Specific additional information was requested by the Scrutiny Panel, on the additional measure the service has taken to support foster carers during the Coronavirus pandemic. This information is provided as an Addendum Paper.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The Fostering Service

The Fostering Service is staffed with experienced practitioners and managers. The areas of specialism within the service are 2-fold: the recruitment and assessment of foster carers; and the support and development of foster carers.

Enfield is a part of the North London Fostering & Permanence Consortium (NLFPC) made up of Enfield, Barnet, Camden, Hackney, Haringey and Islington. The boroughs work together, sharing training, recruitment activities and fostering placements for children across the six boroughs. Shared planning and funding have allowed the consortium boroughs to

deliver more cost effective and innovative services to foster carers and special guardians. The consortium members meet regularly at both a strategic Heads of Service level as well as at an operational level. Staff training and development needs are met both through the Consortium programme and Enfield's own Training and Development Service. Team members are required to attend training to ensure their ongoing development needs are met, as well as maintaining their Social Work England registrations.

All approved foster carers have a named supervising social worker who provides them with regular supervision, monitors the quality of care they deliver and supports their professional development. A comprehensive and flexible training and development programme is available for all carers. Given the increasing complexity of children requiring foster care, ongoing training is crucial. External training has been commissioned from specialist organisations to increase the opportunities available for carers.

Fostering is one of the most heavily regulated services within social care and the independent fostering panel continues to play an important role in monitoring compliance with all statutory requirements and in providing an additional layer of Quality Assurance. The Chair of the Enfield fostering panel has an extensive social work background and is very experienced in the field. Panel members consider the suitability of applicants wishing to foster. Enfield's Agency Decision Maker, the Director of Children's Services, makes the final decision on approvals based on the information and recommendations provided by the panel. Joint panel training between panels members and fostering team members is held twice a year to ensure knowledge on legislation and practice issues are shared.

1.2 Recruitment of Foster Carers

The coronavirus pandemic has proved a challenging context in which to recruit new foster carers, despite this, the service is anticipated to exceed its annual recruitment target of 15 approvals during 2020/21. Details are provided in the Addendum Report.

We currently have 141 foster families (including family & friends and Reg. 24 (temporary approved carers) and 171 looked after children placed. 45% of all our looked after children are placed with in-house foster carers.

2. Regionalisation of Adoption Agencies (RAA)

Following a phased process, the six North London consortium boroughs have joined together to form a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA), named Adopt London North (ALN). The recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters and the matching of children with approved adopters on behalf of the member boroughs, is now completed by the ALN.

The individual boroughs have retained responsibility for agreeing adoption plans for their own looked after children and recommending these plans to the courts. In Enfield, an Early Permanence Manager in the Looked After Children's Service is the key operational link with the ALN. This partnership ensures a joint approach to adoption permanency between the teams responsible for care planning for Enfield children and the ALN.

The ALN has a designated family finding social worker linked to Enfield who is responsible for proactively family finding for our children. Regular 'family finding' meetings are held between the designated ALN Family Finder and the Enfield social workers for the children.

The Fostering & Permanence Service Manager and the Early Care Planning Manager, both attend regular partnership meetings at the ALN as part of the Governance and Quality Assurance Framework.

Once a child has been recommended for a match with a prospective adoptive family by the RAA, this recommendation would need to be signed off by Enfield's own Agency Decision Maker (Director of Children's Services).

Currently:

- 9 children are in the court arena awaiting Placement Orders (i.e. authority from the court to place for adoption)
- 9 children have Placement Order giving authority to place for adoption. Out of these 9 children, 6 are in the process of being matched with adoptive families following family finding processes by Adopt London North and 3 children are subject to family finding processes
- 6 children are already placed with adoptive families and are awaiting court dates for Adoption Order hearings
- 2 children have been adopted to date in this financial year

The pandemic has unfortunately caused delay with court dates for Adoption Order hearings and the courts are currently working on the backlog as a result of this. If the six children currently placed with adopters achieve Adoption Orders in this financial year, we are anticipating a total of 8 Adoption Orders by the end of the year.

3. Special Guardianship Service

The Special Guardianship (SG) Service is now co-located with the Fostering Service and this has streamlined planning for children with improved communication between team members. The work of the SG Service has grown enormously over recent years with far more Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) being made than Adoption Orders. In the last three years we have seen a significant growth in the number of SGOs granted as outlined below:

- 2018-19: 20 SGOs for LAC and 9 SGOs for non-LAC = 29 in total
- 2019-20: 39 SGOs for LAC and 5 SGOs for non-LAC = 44 in total
- 2020-21 to date: 13 SGOs for LAC and 1 SGO for non-LAC = 14 in total

By the end of this financial year, we are anticipating 25-30 more SGOs, depending on the outcomes of the SG assessments currently taking place and the current significant delays in the family court system, caused by Coronavirus.

Following the granting of an SGO, Special Guardian carers are entitled to support services based on need, ranging from low level support provided via the team's duty system or medium-high level support requiring an allocated social worker from the SG Team. Support could also include therapeutic services being provided to families via an application to the DfE Adoption/SG Support Fund which has now been running for over 5 years.

4. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- The number of adoption allowances granted has remained stable over the past few years. Since the last OCS report in September 2019, the adoption allowances paid by Enfield have decreased from 67 to 54, as a result of children turning 18 years of age and no longer meeting the criteria for an allowance. The payment of an ongoing adoption allowance

is discretionary and, wherever possible, we will use one off payments in their place if a child is deemed to have significant needs requiring this support.

- The increasing number of SGO allowances being paid presents a financial challenge. There is no legal discretion over the payment of SG allowances or over the level at which they are paid. Currently we are funding 237 SGO allowances (an increase from the previous year when we were paying 226 SG allowances) and the number continues to grow as more and more children are made subject to Special Guardianship Orders.
- The fostering allowances paid by the Borough are comparable with other local authorities and, since the review of the second and subsequent child rate element which was aligned with the first child rate, this has continued to attract potential foster carers. As always, there is a national shortage of foster carers and recruitment is highly competitive with many foster carers still choosing to foster with independent fostering agencies. Our marketing plan highlights the benefits of fostering for Enfield but a constant focus on recruitment is crucial.
- We are always faced with the challenge of reducing the number of children in Independent Fostering Agency placements so our aim is to continue to recruit in-house foster carers who are able to care for older children and young people who may have difficult behaviours, and/or who may be at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation. The main challenge is that fostering is a very competitive market and potential foster carers may choose to go to an IFA rather than to a Local Authority to foster.
- In adoption, we need prospective adopters who can meet the ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds of our children and adopters who are able to consider children with developmental uncertainties. Since the RAA (named Adopt London North) was set up in October 2019, there has been an increase in the number of approved adopters available to children across the six boroughs. This has resulted in good outcomes for many of Enfield's children where adoption is the plan, but we need to

ensure adopters continue to be assessed and approved for children with a wide range of needs.

- Any operational risks are minimised by attention to good practice in recruiting and preparing foster carers, good quality assessments of Special Guardians, good preparation for children, attention to detail during the introduction and transition process, and continuing support post placement.

5. NEXT STEPS

- To recruit and assess 15+ foster carers in 2020-21
- To help develop a Business Case for a specialist foster care scheme to reduce the use of IFAs and residential placements for the more challenging and complex children
- To move the Fostering and Permanence Service from its longstanding base in Triangle House to its new home in Charles Babbage House, with no disruption to service provision
- To update Risk Assessments and Business Continuity Plans as required to ensure the service continues to deliver high quality services as the Coronavirus pandemic evolve

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Children Young People & Education Scrutiny Panel note the content of this report, the Addendum to this report, and attachments (Fostering Annual Report and Adoption Annual Report)