

SCRUTINY REPORT



MEETING: CYP Scrutiny

DATE: 22 September 2022

SUBJECT: Fostering Sufficiency

REPORT FROM: Linda Evans

CONTACT OFFICER: JEANETTE RICHARDS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 This report provides an update on Bury foster carers and foster carers engaged via Independent Fostering Agencies.

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2.1 For the few children where it is not safe for them to be cared by parents or extended family, we believe that children should have the opportunity to be care for in a family setting within their community. It is our belief that this affords them of the best opportunity to maintain their identity, links to support services, schools and health. Foster carers offer children and young people a safe, loving, and nurturing home when they cannot live with their birth families. This means foster carers have a unique chance to make a real difference to a child's life. For these reasons the development of our internal fostering service is a priority.

2.2 On 1 September 2022 Bury Council looked after 362 children and young people. 237 (67%) of looked after children are cared for by foster carers. A lower percentage of children and young people are cared for in foster placements in Bury when compared to our Statistical Neighbours, 68% and England average, 71%. We are working to increase the number of children and young people being cared for by foster carers.

At the time of writing this report there are:

- 60 fostering households caring for 77 children.
- 44 Family and Friends fostering households caring from 74 children.
- There are currently 7 general foster care assessments being undertaken and 9 family and friend foster care assessments. Whilst numbers are low the recruitment of general foster carers compares well to other local authorities.

2.3 Of the 237 looked after children, 46% are being cared for by Bury approved foster carers; this is lower than our Statistical Neighbour, 53% and the England average, 48%. Therefore, we have fewer children being cared for by Bury foster carers and we have more children

being cared for by independent fostering agency carers. We need to increase the number of children and young people being cared for by Bury foster carers and reduce the number of children and young people being cared for by independent fostering agency carers.

- 2.4 Independent fostering agencies are private organisations that recruit, train, and support foster carers. Foster carers in the UK can choose to register with either a local authority or an independent fostering agency. The application, assessment and check requirements have the same rigour whether the foster carer is a local authority foster carer or independent fostering agency carers and will not only ensure you are well-suited to fostering but will also highlight what types of placements the carers may be suited to and any additional training and support you might need. Typically, the fostering fees and allowances offered to carers for independent fostering agencies are higher than local authority foster carers.
- 2.6 The Fostering Service in Bury sits under the Care and Support Service. The Children's Services restructure that was approved at Cabinet on 13.07.22 is currently subject to consultation ending on 30.09.22. The restructure proposal acknowledges the need for investment in the fostering service, this includes the creation of a Head of Service Role to lead the fostering service, and increased management capacity and social workers with dedicated teams focusing upon the separate activities of growing our internal fostering capacity through recruitment, assessment, and retaining and further developing the skills of our carers with additional support, and adopting an evidenced based mode of foster care, recognised as best practice.

Following the conclusion of the consultation period we intend to establish a programme board leading and overseeing the development of our fostering service and this will also include a review of our support package provided to foster carers and exploration of models of fostering that are innovative. We have approached Stockport Council with a view to engaging them as Sector Led Improvement Partners to support our improvement journey and consider adopting the Mocking Bird Model of foster care as to consider the model focuses upon the importance of relationships and nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community of six to ten satellite families called a constellation, recognising the demands and complexities of the fostering task.

- 2.7 The need to develop placement sufficiency for looked after children is critical and recruiting more foster carers and retaining the dedicated foster carers, we have is key. We are developing a communication strategy that will build on our existing recruitment approaches. However, we are aware that the fostering market is very competitive, and we need to ensure that we are offering foster carers the right incentives and good quality support.
- 2.8 At Bury fostering service we benefit from Foster Carer Ambassadors who are approved Foster Carers themselves and are best placed to share lived experiences about being a carer and provide information about Fostering with Bury as well as answering any questions/queries people may have. Since Covid restrictions have been lifted Ambassadors attend community events across the borough.
- 2.9 All foster carers are allocated a Supervising Social Worker to provide support and guidance on approval. All foster carers are also provided with the equipment they require when a child is placed, and a fostering allowance and fee that is competitive with other Greater Manchester local authorities. It is important to note Foster Carers are not employees and therefore are not paid an hourly rate, this is the same in all local authorities.
- 2.10 A comprehensive package of training is offered to carers and a training manual is provided with a suite of sessions provided over the calendar year. All foster carers are required to undertake regular post foster care approval training as part of the professional development. Mandatory training is to be completed every three years and this includes – Safeguarding, Paediatric first aid, CEOP, Safe Sleeping, equality, and diversity, promoting family time, recording. Nonmandatory training includes, understanding Year 6 SATS, Knife crime and associated risks, attachment, creating readers, anti-bullying, hate crime, managing

allegations. In the Autumn 2022 we will be offering specialist Trauma Informed training to all Bury Foster Carers that will support them to respond to the emotional well-being of children. Attendance at training is reviewed in the annual fostering reviews. The service continually work to offer a varied and interesting training programme to support foster carers in their role and carers are invited to contribute ideas and suggestions.

- 2.11 The council fund the membership of all approved Foster Carers in Bury to the Fostering Network which is an independent service, as part of this membership carers can seek independent, confidential advice and support on fostering matters and related legal issues. The advice and mediation service offers confidential independent advice and support to foster carers. By purchasing this service Bury is acknowledging that foster carers are an essential part of the professional team around the child and recognise that foster carers are uniquely vulnerable and may at times require additional independent support.
- 2.12 Silver Cloud and PAMs support is also funded for all carers, this service offers 24/7 helpline support to assist with emotional health and well-being.
- 2.13 There is a foster carer forum that meets twice yearly, foster carers set the agenda for the the forum and it provides an opportunity to discuss things that are important to them and for the service to update them on new guidance and developments.
- 2.14 We are conscious of the cost-of-living crisis and the financial struggles faced by families and foster carers; an annual 2.3% uplift was applied this financial year. In recognition of the increased fuel costs the mileage payment has increased to 45p per mile, and this has been backdated for this financial year (01.04.22).
- 2.15 Jeanette Richards Executive Director of Children's Services has recently met with the Chair of our fostering forum, this has been helpful and has provided insight into the challenges and rewards of fostering, future development of the service will need to be a collaboration between officers and our foster carers and young people.

3.0 CONCLUSION

- 3.1 Recruitment and retention of foster carers is a priority and implementation of plans and progress will be closely monitored.
- 3.2 If we are to be successful in our recruitment campaigns the full support of the Council and its partners are required.
- 3.3 Bury is a foster friendly employee which means that any approved Bury foster carer receives time and support to fulfil their role and to support children and young people in care.

List of Background Papers:-

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Executive Director sign off Date: _____

JET Meeting Date: _____