

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES AND TACKLING INEQUALITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Agenda Item No. 7
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Report of the Executive Director of Children's Services

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REVIEW OF PLACEMENT STRATEGY FOR CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FOSTERING ACTION PLAN

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 This report provides Scrutiny with an update in relation to Children in Care placements and progress relating to the Fostering Action Plan.

It focuses on progress made in bringing the mix of placements for children in care in Peterborough more into line with national averages through the recruitment and retention of in-house foster carers. It also details actions that we are taking to help to ensure that we only look after the right children, at the right time in their lives, and for the minimum possible period, in line with best practice.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The Committee is asked to note the contents of the report and particularly the indications of success in the recruitment and retention of in-house foster carers for children and young people who are looked after in Peterborough.

3. LINKS TO THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

- 3.1 Creating Opportunities - Tackling Opportunities

- Supporting vulnerable people

4. BACKGROUND

This report updates Members on progress made over the last 12 months in increasing the proportion of children and young people in care in Peterborough who are placed with our own foster carers as opposed to foster carers provided by independent fostering agencies.

4.1 Context

Most children and young people achieve the best lifelong outcomes by being cared for within their families. All families experience short term crises from time to time. In most circumstances, families are able to call on their own extended family or friendship networks to support them through such crises without the need for any other external support.

Not all families have access to informal support mechanisms, however, making it more difficult for them to manage the sort of challenges experienced by us all. In addition, some groups of families – those with a child with a complex disability for example – may have considerable support from their family and friendship networks, but still need this to be supplemented if the family is to not come under significant pressures.

A small group of children are unable to be safely cared for within their families without an intensive programme of assessment and support. A smaller group still cannot remain with their families at all because the risks to them are too great.

Where children do have to move from their birth families, it is better that they do so at as early an age as possible. This is so they can make secure attachments to their new permanent carers, who are either adopting them or who have applied for a Special Guardianship Order or Residence Order. In some cases, children can be placed permanently with relatives, ensuring that they maintain a link with their birth families.

Children who are adopted or placed permanently on a Special Guardianship or Residence Order from an early age the children are likely to achieve the best lifelong outcomes of any who come into the care system.

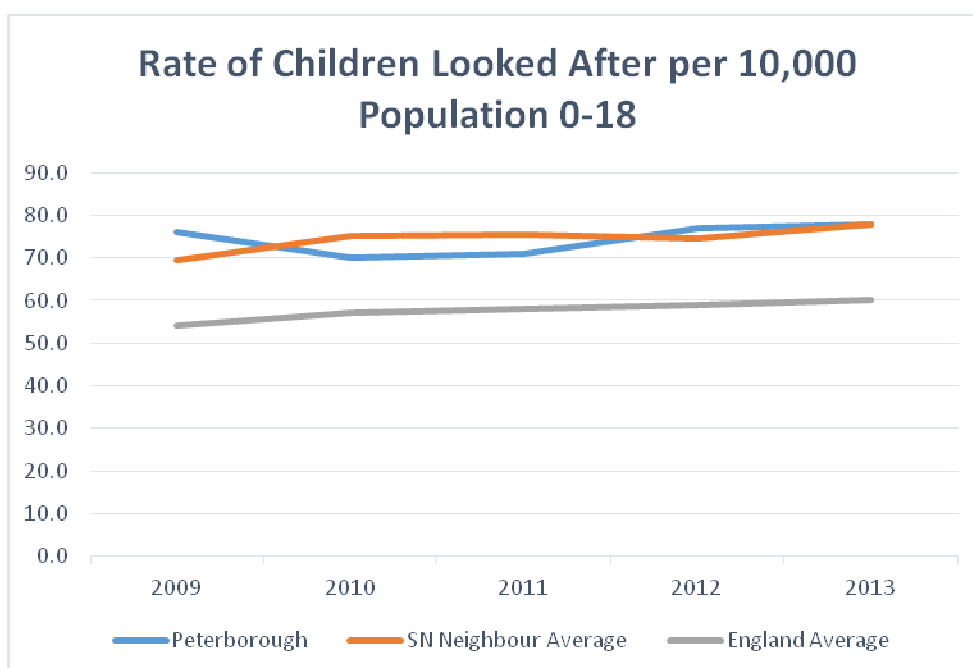
Our aim has therefore been to offer families with older children intensive and flexible support services so that they can address challenges they are facing without the need for their children to come into care, while ensuring that where families have very young children, we do not delay decision making either before they come into care or for the time that they are in care.

Not only is such practice the best way of securing positive outcomes for children and young people who come into the care system or who are on the edge of doing so, but it also leads to a better use of resources.

4.2 Overall Numbers of Children and Young People Looked After

The overall number of children and young people looked after as of the end of November 2013 was approximately 355 [the number is always approximate as it fluctuates slightly on a daily basis as children enter and leave the care system]. This compares with an approximate number of 365 children and young people in care in June 2013, and there has been a gradual downward trend between June and November 2013.

The most common way of expressing numbers of children and young people looked after is the rate per 10,000 population of children and young people. This enables comparisons to be drawn with national and other authority trends and performance. The chart below compares the rate of children looked after in Peterborough with the average of our statistical neighbours and the England average over the last five years, up to and including the year 2012/13 – data that has been published recently:



The chart above shows that there has been an increasing number of children and young people coming into the care system among our statistical neighbours as well as nationally between 2012 and 2013. Set in this context, the recent downward trend in Peterborough is a clear achievement.

The chart also illustrates how having too few children and young people in the care system may be an indication that children and young people are not being adequately safeguarded. The rate in Peterborough in 2010 and 2011 was much lower than years previously or since, coinciding with the period when OFTSED assessed safeguarding arrangements in the City to be inadequate.

We have implemented a number of initiatives and reforms in order to ensure that we are looking after only those children and young people who absolutely need to be looked after, and that when we do look after children and young people, we do so for the least possible time. These changes include:

- Provision of commissioned crisis response family support services that aim to prevent family breakdown in families where there are older children and young people. These services are available at times when families are typically under pressure – evenings and weekends for example. Once the immediate difficulties are addressed, our Adolescent Intervention Service works intensively with the family and young person to build parenting abilities and help families to better negotiate relationships so that further build up in tensions is avoided;
- Provision of commissioned and directly provided support services that work with families with younger children, helping them to develop their parenting skills within the home and address the difficulties that they are experiencing so that their children are able to remain safely in their care;
- Commissioned and directly provided services that help to support children and young people to return either to their own families or to extended families safely and as quickly as possible in the event that they do need to come into care;
- Development of a highly responsive and flexible range of support services for families who have children with complex disabilities, enabling this group of children to remain being cared for within their own families for as long as is possible and in line with what families and children with disabilities tell us that they want;
- An adoption tracking process that ensures that young children who come into care and for whom a safe return home to family or extended family is not possible are placed for adoption as quickly as legally possible;
- A fortnightly performance meeting that oversees progress for all children and young people who are looked after;
- Oversight of high cost resources through the Peterborough Access to Support Panels, chaired by the Acting Assistant Director, Commissioning.

Despite the availability of these services, pressures on the system remain intense. There is an increasing birth rate, for example, making it more important than ever that we work with our partners to identify situations where parents may need support in order to care for their baby and where it may be unsafe for the baby to be in their parents' care during the pregnancy so that the necessary services and assessments can be put in place and completed prior to birth wherever possible.

4.3

Recruitment and Retention of in-house Foster Placements

Where children and young people do need to come into care, it makes sense for a number of reasons that they are placed with our own foster carers, as opposed to carers provided by independent fostering agencies. There are a number of reasons for this, including:

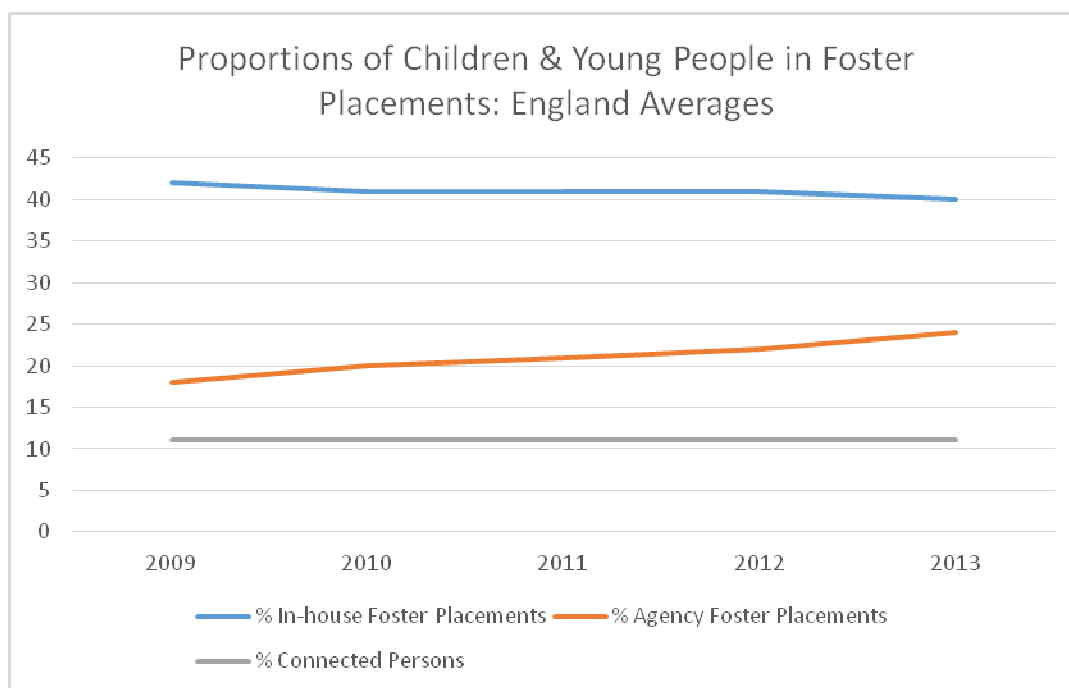
- Our own carers are much more likely to be local and living in or close to the City, making it easier for children to retain school places, have contact with their families and maintain peer relationships;
- We get to know our own foster carers really well, making it easier for us to match the needs of children coming into care with the foster carers available;
- Using our own carers is a better use of financial resources as unit costs are lower.

For all of these reasons, recruiting foster carers has therefore been a high priority for the service over the last 12 months, and remains so.

Foster care recruitment is an area where constant activity is required simply to maintain the status quo as a number of carers will always leave fostering during any one year. Often, foster carers cease fostering for the very best reasons in relation to individual children; for example a number of carers stop fostering for Peterborough every year because they have decided to adopt children who have been placed with them. This is a great result for the individual children concerned but still results in a reduction in foster placements available to the City.

Recruitment activities have been given a new focus in the current financial year; we have invested in a new website, new marketing materials and a far more intensive recruitment campaign than we have in any previous years. The Fostering Service has an agreement with the Commissioning Service that it will achieve a net increase in mainstream foster carers of 24 during the current financial year 2013/14 – a very stretching target. To put the current target in context, the service achieved a net gain of only 10 new mainstream foster carers in 2012/13, despite considerable efforts.

Recruitment of foster carers is an activity that takes place in a highly competitive market. There are a number of large fostering agencies that are well-established within the Peterborough area. These agencies have access to significant financial backing, and have developed expertise in the recruitment, training and assessment of foster carers. Over recent years across the country, Agencies have been steadily increasing their share of looked after children placements, as shown by the chart below:



The above illustrates the challenge on a national level of recruiting and retaining in-house foster placements in the face of a concerted effort to increase market share by fostering agencies. Agency foster placements are typically around three times the cost of in-house placements so even small changes in overall proportions can have significant impact on placement budgets.

However, contrary to national trends, recruitment activity in Peterborough in the year to date has been encouraging, and is showing a significant improvement against progress made in 2012/13. Activity to date is summarised in the table below:

Carer Type	New Approvals	Terminations	Net Change
Mainstream	15	4	11
Connected	1	1	1
Link & Respite	3	1	2
Total	19	6	13

The net gain of 10 mainstream carers in the year 2012/13 has already been exceeded in the current financial year. There are a further 26 mainstream fostering assessments in progress at present, making the stretch target for the service of a net gain in foster placements of 14 for the year to April 2014 just about achievable.

The effectiveness of the new campaign, website and overall approach in place for the current year is also demonstrated by the number of enquiries made to the service about becoming foster carers, which to the end of November was over 200, compared with 170 for the year as a whole in 2012/13.

Connected carers are relatives or close friends of the children who have been assessed as carers for those individual children only, so they do not become available to look after other children and young people once the child that they have been caring for moves on.

Link and Respite carers do not take full time placements; they offer short break placements either so that our mainstream carers are able to take a break or to support the families of children with disabilities by offering those children short breaks away from home.

4.4

Placement Mix Performance 2012-13:

We are also seeing steady positive changes in the placement mix of the looked after population in Peterborough. The proportion of our children and young people placed with in-house foster placements is increasing while the proportion placed with Agency Fostering is declining:

Placement Type	Peterborough Nov 2012 %	Peterborough Nov 2013 %	National Average 2013 %
In House fostering	35%	38%	40%
Agency Fostering	38%	33%	24%
Connected	6%	9%	11%
Residential including secure, secure remands & residential schools	10%	9%	12%
Independent Living	5%	4%	3%
Placed adoption	5%	4%	5%
Placement with Parents	2%	2%	5%

We have also increased the proportion of children and young people placed with connected persons – i.e. with relatives or friends – over the last 12 months – bringing this more into line with the national average position. This type of placement is often a good option for the child or young person concerned as it enables them to remain within their extended family or friendship network, as opposed to being placed with carers they do not know.

4.5

Placement Mix Performance 2012-13: Residential Placements

Over the last 12 months we have taken significant steps to reduce the number of children and young people in residential placements. The number of children who are in care and who are placed in residential placements has reduced from 29 to 22 between November 2012 and November 2013. Residential placements are associated with some of the poorest outcomes for children and young people in the care system, and it is a priority to reduce their use for this reason.

This is a significant movement and reflects our determination to ensure that young people placed in residential provision are moved on into semi-independent living placements once they have concluded statutory education, rather than remaining in residential care. Not only does this lead to a better use of resources, but semi-independent placements are much better at preparing young

people for independent living at age 18 than residential children's homes.

We have also developed a highly flexible range of support services to families with children and young people who have disabilities, offering a range of community based short breaks, direct payments, activities and some overnight short breaks. These services have proved their worth in enabling more children and young people to remain within their families – as both they and their families say that they want to happen – and which in turn reduces the likelihood that they will need expensive specialist care and education placements.

4.6

Increasing Diversity of our Child Looked After Population

Given that the population of Peterborough is becoming increasingly diverse, it is not surprising that the child and young person in care population is reflecting this.

Approximately 8% of the child in care population as of November 2013 is from Eastern European backgrounds – this is below the percentage of the overall child population in the City which comes from Eastern Europe, which was estimated as 10% by the Office of National Statistics in 2011.

Children and young people of dual heritages are the largest overall minority ethnic group within the care system at 9% [although this group includes white and black Caribbean, White and Asian and all other mixed backgrounds]. This is a slight under representation compared with the overall community, where the ONS estimated that children from dual heritage backgrounds make up approximately 11% of the overall child population in the City.

Children from Pakistani and African heritages make up 3.1% and 2.8% of the child in care population respectively, compared with approximately 11% and 2% of the overall child population in the City. Children from Pakistani heritages are therefore significantly under represented among the child looked after population, while children from African heritages are slightly over represented.

Children from White British backgrounds are over-represented in the looked after system in Peterborough, accounting for just over 70% of all children and young people in care, compared with approximately 62% of the 0-18 population in Peterborough according to ONS estimates based on the 2011 census.

The challenge for the service in meeting the needs of this changing population include:

- Delivering effective family support services that can engage with families from differing cultural backgrounds, enabling them to make the sustained changes necessary in order that their children achieve the best possible outcomes while remaining in their care, and;
- Recruiting foster and adoptive carers from backgrounds similar to the child in care population so that all children and young people who do come into care are placed with families with similar cultural histories, practices and approaches to life.

The latter point is a particular challenge when it comes to recruiting carers from communities who are newly arrived into the country. Foster carers in general are often parents who have older or grown up children; they have become established in the community and are looking for new challenges. They are therefore usually from a slightly more mature group than the population as a whole. This more mature group has yet to form among those communities who are newly arrived in the country simply because they have not yet been here for long enough.

5. KEY ISSUES

5.1 Key issues arising from the above include:

- The number of children and young people in care in Peterborough is in line with the current average of our statistical neighbours and does now appears to be on a gradual downward trend. This is in line with expectations and represents a positive picture when compared to the trend among our statistical neighbours and the national picture;

- The proportion of the children and young people in care who are placed with our own in-house foster carers has increased significantly and is now close to the national average;
- The proportion of children and young people placed in Agency foster placements has reduced significantly, although remains above the national average;
- We have achieved significant reductions in the proportion of children and young people placed in residential placements and our performance is now significantly better than national average performance in this area;
- These changes have been achieved while maintaining best child-care practice and not considering placement moves for children and young people who are settled in their placements;
- Progress in relation to the recruitment and retention of foster carers has been strong, with more general foster carers recruited up to November 2013 than in the entire year previous financial year and with significant numbers of carers in assessment. The stretch target of 24 mainstream foster carers is still within reach which would be an exceptional performance;
- The rapid increase in diversity of our children in care population also poses challenges both in relation to providing culturally appropriate support services to prevent needs escalating within families such that children are at risk of coming into care and in recruiting carers able to meet the cultural, religious and linguistic needs of children from black and minority ethnic communities in the City.

Significant progress has therefore been made in relation to managing overall numbers of children and young people within the looked after system in the City, while bringing the placement mix more into line with national averages through the recruitment of more foster carers over the last 12 months. Nevertheless, pressure on the system remains significant and the projected increase in child population in the City is likely to increase the pressure on overall numbers of children and young people in care in future years.

6. IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The financial targets in relation to the costs of children's care placements are stretching. They assume continued strong performance in the recruitment of in-house foster placements and a gradual reduction in the number of children in care to 330 by 2017 within the context of a growing population of children and young people in the City.

Performance in relation to both elements in the year to date has been strong, however, placing the service in a good position moving forward.

While the increased performance by the Fostering Service in recruiting and retaining foster carers has been managed within existing resources to date, continuing to increase the number of foster carers will eventually mean that there will be a requirement for additional social workers to support the increased number of carers and to undertake tasks such as household reviews. While this is clearly better than the alternative – more children being placed with agency foster carers – additional costs in this part of the service will offset some of the financial gain achieved by placing more children and young people with in-house carers.

The increasing diversity of our child in care population will require us to develop new approaches to engaging with those communities and encourage them to consider fostering as a career that would benefit not only themselves but their wider community.

The implications of this report relate to the City as a whole as opposed to any individual wards.

7. CONSULTATION

- 7.1 Consultation has taken place with the Children's Services Directorate Management Team and with the Fostering Service.

8. NEXT STEPS

- 8.1 Analysis of the potential impact of the growing child population in the City is to be completed and reported to CMT.

It is suggested that an updated report on the continuing efforts to recruit in-house foster carers and the implementation of the Placement Strategy to bring overall placement mix in line with national averages is prepared for Scrutiny in January 2014.

9. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

- 9.1 Department for Education, Statistical First Release: Children looked after in England, including adoption; 2013

10. APPENDICES

- 10.1 None.