

Briefing report to Performance and Scrutiny Committee - Partnerships

Date: 24th April 2024

Subject: Fostering services update

Purpose: To ensure Members are fully sighted on the progress and plans of the fostering service. To scrutinise the report and consult scrutiny on future reports.

Background:

Within Newport we currently have a Children Looked After population of around 349 children. Children are cared for by Local Authority foster carers, supported lodgings carers, Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) carers and residential homes. 15 NCC foster carers are family members caring for their relatives. These are children subject to Care Orders due to the level of risks posed to the carers/children by the parental circumstances but where alternative family members have the capacity to provide safe, positive and nurturing care.

Of all the children living with foster carers, around 83% are in NCC fostering arrangements. NCC fostering arrangements include children placed with general foster carers, kinship foster carers and under regulation 26 arrangements.

The priority is always to support children as close to home as possible and in settings that most fully meet their needs for the short, medium and long term. There is a long-term strategic plan to return our Out of County children to Newport from both Residential and Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements. If we do not work towards a long-term aim to increase foster carer numbers then costs of IFA placements will continue to increase.

Our aim as a fostering service is to recruit local families to provide foster placements within the local authority boundaries to be able to maintain the child's links with their family, friends, and community.

Present:

Eliminate profit from care

The Welsh Government's Programme for Government contains a number of key commitments relating to a new vision for Children's Social Care. At its heart, the Welsh Government wants to see fewer children and young people entering care.

For children in care, the aim is for them to remain as close to home as possible so they can continue to be part of their community and for their stay in care to be for a short period.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to 'eliminate private profit from the care of children looked after during the next Senedd term.'

Eliminating profit from care is about transitioning to a not for profit model of care in Wales, focussing on values and not finances, fundamentally changing how we care for children and their families as part of a network of local, community-based services that have the welfare of the young person as the absolute priority. The aim is to ensure that public money invested in accommodation for care experienced children is not extracted as profit, but instead is reinvested back into the system to support better outcomes, services and professional development.

Newport has seen a steady reduction in the use of IFA foster carers and there are currently 35 children cared for by IFA foster carers. Of this number, 22 are placed with commercial IFA carers and 13 with 3rd sector, not for profit IFA carers.

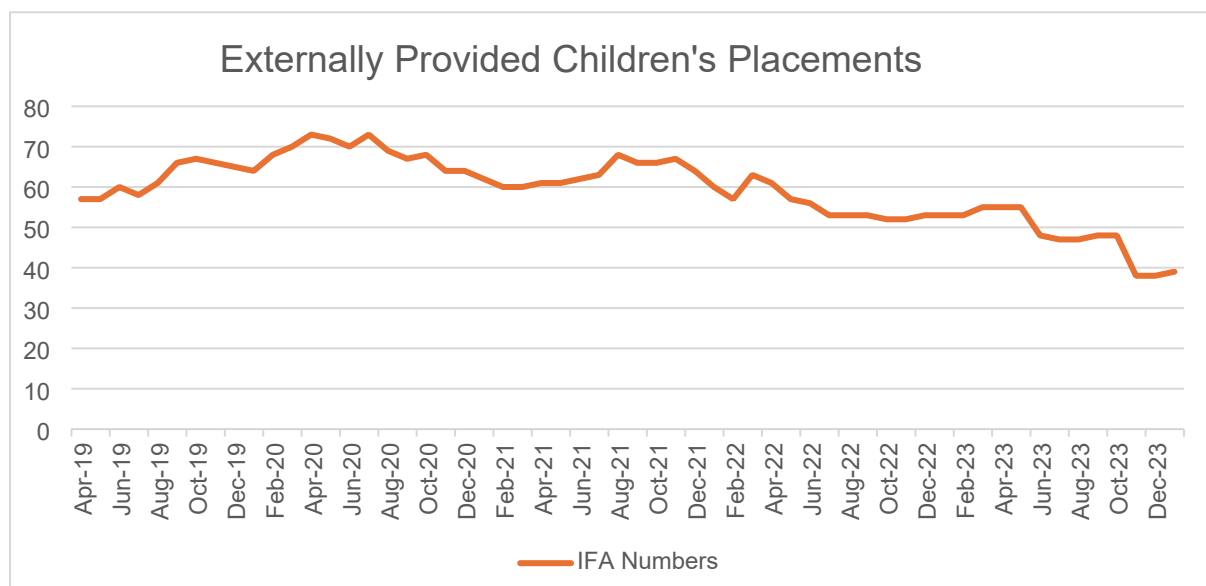
We continue to place more children with our in-house foster carers than with agency foster carers.

Of the 35 children living with IFA foster carers, 27 children live outside the local authority boundary, which is 77.1% of the placements we have commissioned from the agencies.

As of 31st March 2024, we have one parent and child foster placement, commissioned via an independent fostering agency. This specialism is an area of work that is being specifically targeted for development in-house.

Newport have recently commissioned the development of a full parent and child training programme, in order to be able to upskill foster carers to be able to proactively support parents and their babies from an early stage.

The chart below demonstrates the reduction in use of IFA carers over the past 5 years.



Work is being undertaken under the elimination of profit agenda to continue to reduce the number of children cared for by commercial IFA foster carers.

In order to support this, we need to continue recruiting more fostering households and supporting the retention of approved foster carers to continue to be able to offer local placements for our children.

Having a dedicated budget for foster carer recruitment and a recruitment officer is invaluable to our recruitment activity.

Recruitment

Foster Wales is the national network of 22 Welsh Local Authority fostering services. As part of their work, they have created specific National media campaigns to highlight Local Authority foster care.

There has been a significant national and combined LA recruitment effort in the past 3 years, focussing on both the recruitment and retention of LA foster carers.

Foster Wales successfully secured funding for a 2 year fixed term post of recruitment officer, within the Fostering team. This has provided a consistent and dedicated resource for recruitment, allowing us to respond to enquiries and take applicants up to the point of assessment, within consistent timescales.

As this was a national bid, funding posts across all 22 LA's, it has also created a national network of recruitment officers, through Foster Wales, to share good practice and support each other.

Newport's recruitment officer came into post at the end of July 23 and has already positively impacted upon marketing for recruitment, with 18 dedicated recruitment events to date.

These include;

- monthly coffee mornings in a local business venue,
- community events at the local train station and the Christmas Lights switch on,
- library drop in sessions,
- a charity Walk for NSPCC to raise money for the charity and awareness of fostering and
- presence at local supermarkets.

There have also been some notable campaigning events in Newport such as the "Bringing something to the table"; a celebrity chef event held at Newport Market and the support of Newport County football team, using a home game to invite one of our foster families to be match mascots, having an electronic board throughout the match with the details of Foster Wales Newport and making announcements throughout the match in regard to fostering.

Below is the recruitment activity data covering the last 12 months.

Enquiries	Initial Home Visits	Assessments allocated	Assessments completed	Assessments ended at stage 1.	Fostering households approved	Number of places
89	15	12	7	2	8	9

Fees

In Newport this year we have been able to build in a 3% increase to the entire allowance for all Foster carers, within our allocated budget.

The average annual cost per child placed with an NCC foster carer is £19,916

Amongst their programme of work, Foster Wales are undertaking a project to seek a harmonisation of foster carer fees across all Welsh LA's. The work was due to complete at the end of March 2024 however this has been delayed.

Welsh Government asked Foster Wales to complete the work necessary to identify the cost and produce a business case to meet any detriment.

In April 2023 Foster Wales commissioned an external partner, Practice Solutions, to support this work. A project steering group has been established, including local authority finance representatives, regional development managers and the WLGA.

Welsh Government have been made aware that local authorities will require significant investment in order to achieve harmonisation, however this is something that there is a strong will to achieve.

Future:

We will continue our work to recruit and retain general NCC foster carers through our dedicated recruitment campaigns.

We will move forward with recruiting and training foster carers who can offer placements to parents and their babies in order to support families to stay together

We will focus on developing specialist fostering placements with a psychological support team to avoid residential admissions unless in the best interest of the child.

Risk:

Risk	Impact of Risk if it occurs* (H/M/L)	Probability of risk occurring (H/M/L)	What is the Council doing or what has it done to avoid the risk or reduce its effect	Who is responsible for dealing with the risk?
Insufficient numbers of foster carers to meet demand	H	M	Recruitment strategy in place, supported by Foster Wales. A dedicated officer is in post to focus on recruitment activity. Packages of support are being developed and	Head of Children's Services, Strategic Director of People

			<p>include advice clinics with a psychology team.</p> <p>24/25 increase in foster carer fees to help with recruitment and retention.</p>	
<p>Insufficient specialist carers to support children with the most complex needs.</p>	H	H	<p>MyST team are in place to offer intense support to identified placements.</p> <p>Joint working in place across service teams in order to identify the correct support practitioners.</p> <p>Targeted recruitment campaigns planned</p>	<p>Head of Children's Services, Strategic Director of People</p>