

TRAFFORD COUNCIL – CHILDREN’S SERVICES

Report to: Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Committee
Date: 09.03.2022
Report for: Information
Report of: Sharon Hawkins – Head of Service Provider Services.

Report Title:

Foster Carer Recruitment

Summary:

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the recruitment activity in respect of foster care in Trafford. The report will summarise the work being undertaken in respect of Recruitment and Retention of foster carers and the utilization of our untapped resources by a exploring a range of housing solutions/initiatives.

Recommendation(s)

For Scrutiny to note the contents of this report
To note the progress to date in respect of the work of the fostering service
To provide challenge to the Service

Contact person for access to background papers and further information:

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1. Introduction

Over the last 12 months the service has been involved in a structured approach to modernising the fostering service. This approach was very much in recognition of the fact that recruitment activity had slowed, and we had gaps in our sufficiency over and above anticipated sufficiency issues. A feature of this has been slow recruitment whilst also having a number of carers leave fostering for different reasons.

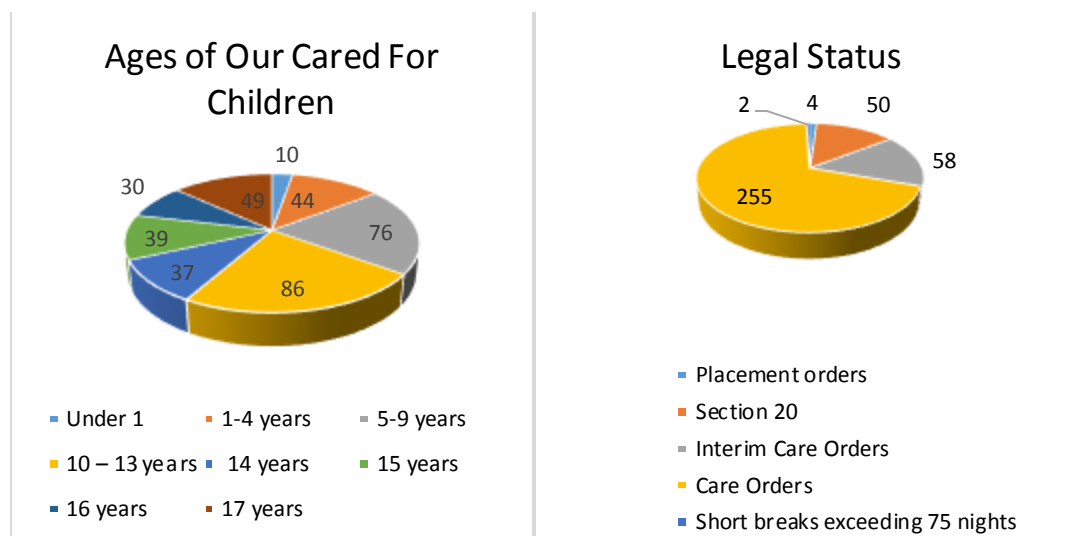
It remains our aspiration to have as many children cared for locally, with Trafford carers who feel supported and have access to the support they need at the time they need it.

In order to support this approach a dedicated “Project Fostering” has been set up and established which outlines the steps and actions that are being progressed to achieve our stated aim. In addition, as part of Children’s Services redesign the Fostering Team has been re-structured to follow a functional model with the distinct teams having been created: Recruitment Team, Support Team, and a Special Guardian Team. As we all as structuring in this way an additional 8 posts have been established within the service to create capacity to support this critical work.

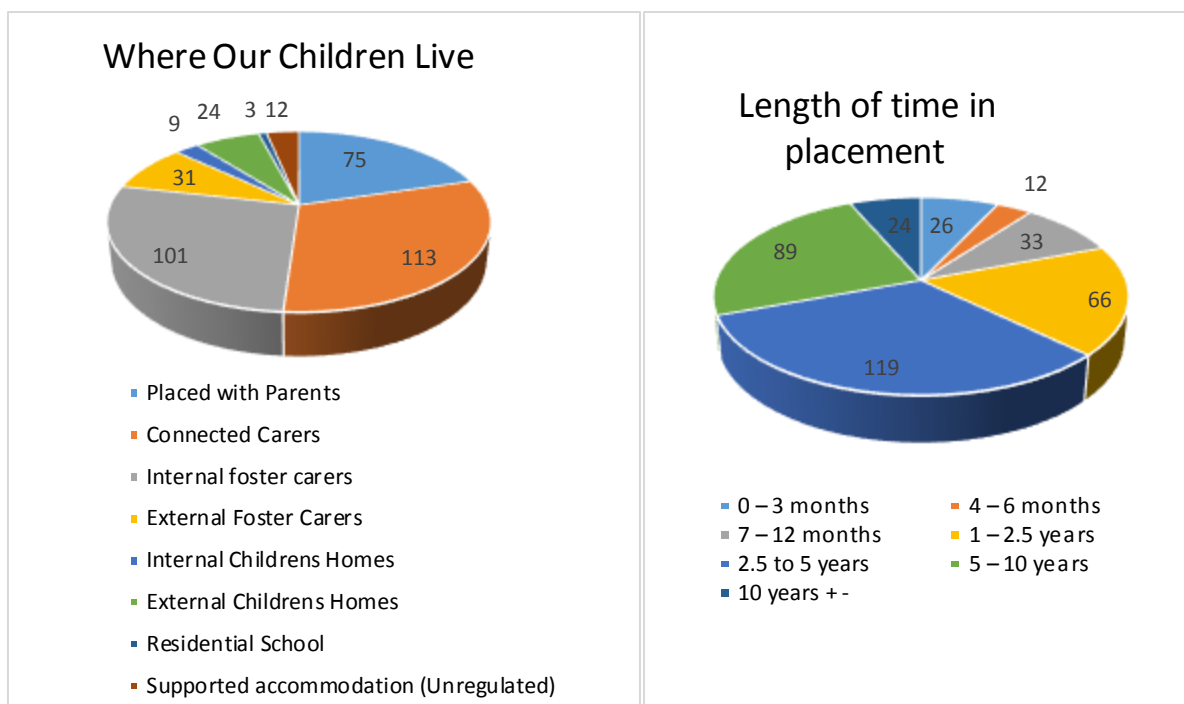
Our Cared for Children

In order to understand whether we have sufficient foster cares and to determine our targeted approach to recruitment we need to have a shared understanding of who are children in care are and where they live.

The charts below show the ages of our Cared for Children and their Legal Status



The next chart illustrates the details of where our Cared for Children live and as can be seen, the majority of our cared for children live in a family home and have done so for over 2 years.



For a significant number of our children and young people this care is provided by their own families, where children are placed with their own parents under a court order or are living with connected carers (usually family members that have been formally approved as foster carers for a named child).

We have strategies in place to reduce our Placement with Parents numbers safely (with oversight of the courts) – and have seen a 12% reduction this year. Where possible and appropriate we are converting connected carers to either Special Guardianships or Child Arrangements Orders (SGO/CAO). We have created as part of the re-model of the service a bespoke support team for connected carers and SGO carers.

21 children this year to date have secured permanence via SGO which is a significant increase on the previous year.

However, we are mindful that we need to improve recruitment of our own foster carers to reduce reliance on external placements some of which are residential and at a distance from Trafford. We want to keep our children close.

Recruitment Activity

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on fostering recruitment both nationally and locally. Whilst a number of people who were experiencing employment challenges

took the opportunity to explore fostering there were others who were understandably reluctant to come forward to have new people in their households.

In terms of Local Authority recruitment activity social distancing and remote working presented some challenges in respect of face-to-face meetings particularly when planning for larger numbers of people attending. As a consequence, over the past two years many planned recruitment events and activities have had to move from in person events to digital marketing campaigns.

In response to this Local Authorities have needed to become more innovative and rethink their marketing strategies. In Trafford over the past six months, we have had a campaign which has been run by LocaliQ which utilizes digital platforms such as Facebook and Google to reach out to potential applicants. Even with this added layer of marketing it has remained challenging to recruit new foster carers.

Demographically we have an aging population of our current foster carers with the average age of our carer's being 52.2 years. Seven of our carers have been on "hold" from taking placements. One family had adopted a child, one carer due to illness and the other five due to allegations. This has compounded some of sufficiency and availability of Trafford carers

However, it is also a year when we have also launched a range of initiatives and through our involvement in the GM community of practice, we are benefitting from opportunities to collaborate which will be discussed in this report.

2. Summary Report

Digital Marketing Campaign

Prior to September 2021 recruitment activity relied on use of the councils' digital platforms and, whilst this was welcomed, also had several challenges due to the many competing demands and ongoing pandemic.

During the pandemic community events which the fostering team would ordinarily have been involved with were cancelled with our marketing having to move to a purely digital platform. We had regular online presence with the Council Facebook and Twitter pages updated with Key Messages – inviting residents to get involved and catch phrases such as –**Think you Can't Think again- Be a Life Changer and foster a**

child in your local area. Interactive clips representing the views of young people and the diversity of Trafford Carers were used and promoted.

From September 2021 we used a focused social media campaign by LocaliQ to communicate our need for carers for older children, children with complex needs, sibling groups and children from black and ethnic minority communities. This was part of our wider fostering recruitment campaign and our new marketing strategy that is being drafted, which includes promotion of word-of-mouth referrals from existing foster carers and use of our internal communications team to undertake regular updates on our Trafford Facebook and Twitter pages.

The campaign from Local IQ had projected that we would see an increase in our initial enquires, initial visits and assessments:

The LocaliQ Digital Marketing Campaign was anticipated to generate the following:

- Initial Enquiries x 20 per month
- Initial Visits x 4-6 per month
- Assessments x 5 per month

The table below provides a summary of the activity within the fostering service over the past financial year. The table highlights the impact of the digital campaign in driving activity to Trafford’s Recruitment website however despite the increase in enquiries evident since September 2021 these have not translated into an increase in initial visits or new applications for foster carers.

Stage	Detail	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Aug-21	Sept-21	Oct-21	Nov-21	Dec-21	Jan-22	Feb-22
Initial Enquiries	Number of initial enquiries received within each month	16	10	9	13	7	24	24	25	25	23	20
Initial Visits	Total number of applications received in month	1	3	2	1	1	1	3	2	0	1	1
Applications	Total number of applications received in month from prospective fostering households	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	1
Assessments	Number of fostering households actively engaged in a Fostering	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	3	2	4

	Assessment on the last day of each reporting month											
Approvals	Total number of households approved by Agency Decision Maker within each month	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Carer Exits	Total households that have left the fostering service within each month.	2	0	0	0	1	2	2	1	1	1	2
Households	Total number of approved households	90	91	91	92	91	89	87	86	85	85	83
Placements	Total number of children and young people placed within those approved households	106	106	108	107	107	105	102	100	102	103	101

Bury Council Fostering Service used LocaliQ as a digital marketing partner for 18 months and they report to have had a good increase in enquiries and that this has resulted in 4 new sets of foster carers that have been approved in this period. They have concluded that it has been well worth having the support of a digital partner, especially during Covid when there have been limited other activities in place.

Our analysis as to the reasons why the enquiries have not translated into new applications has indicated that there are two primary reasons which include potential applicants not having a spare room and therefore no capacity to care for a child in their homes based on our current need for, sibling groups and older children. The applicants not progressed at the enquiry stage due to not having a spare room would only have had capacity to take a baby and we do not currently have a need to recruit carers for babies. Other potential applicants have been browsing on the internet and have clicked on an advert but when we have then come to follow these up, they have not engaged any further in the process- often something they may be interested in further down the line but not now. The data supplied by LocaliQ indicated that the majority of the enquiries approx. 71% came from women and that they accessed the adverts via mobile devices. Our analysis is that whilst the campaign by LocaliQ appears to attract people early in their thinking about fostering many are not yet ready to commit at this stage, they may come back and be ready to convert later and we will be re-contacting some of these potential leads in 12 months' time to see if anything has changed for them.

There is a high proportion of enquiries made via mobile phones late at night and we have found it difficult to make contact with the enquirers which potentially indicates

they have not thought seriously about fostering but rather clicked the link on social media out of curiosity. The most used search terms which drove prospective applicants to our websites included Fostering and Foster Care and this was followed by Fostering Trafford.

To try and improve our conversion from enquiries to applications all fostering enquiries are responded to within a 24-hour window. We aim to complete a visit the same week (if possible, depending on applicant's availability). Responses are being completed within 24 hours, the fostering information pack is emailed immediately, followed up by a telephone call. If there is no response, we are leaving voice messages and this is followed by a text message, followed up by email with information about the monthly webinars.

The Northwest Fostering Recruitment Teams meet up every quarter via team to discuss up and coming events, best practice and on some occasions, there are guest speakers from marketing companies showcasing what they can offer. The Recruitment Officer attends the majority of these meetings as does the Practice Manager. Trafford are also in collaboration with Wigan, Bolton and Bury in putting together a monthly webinar to answer any questions potential applicants may have about fostering for their respective LA and to showcase the difference between fostering for the LA compared to fostering for an IFA and identifying any learning or sharing success and new methods.

Trafford Communication Marketing Team

Our Recruitment Team including the Practice Manager and Recruitment Officer are meeting on a monthly basis with the communications team and have a number of initiatives in process. A social media video promoting home from home carers is due to be released in the coming weeks. This is in response to a number of our home from home carers retiring over the last year and there being a need to target recruitment in this area. We are also waiting for a sign off to promote fostering and becoming a foster carer with Trafford via council tax letters, this could potentially lead to every resident in Trafford receiving literature relating to becoming a foster carer for Trafford.

3. Recruitment of New Foster Carers

We currently have approved four new sets of mainstream foster carers since March 2021 to date. We also have four assessments which are in process and have scheduled panel dates. In comparison the previous year between April 2020 and March 2021 we had recruited four new sets of mainstream carers and two foster to adopt carers. In the past year however, we have had 12 de-registrations/ resignations, 7 foster carers, 5 resigned due to changes in their circumstances age and ill health, 2 of the resignations following there being concerns raised as to the quality of care. The other 5 carers were de-registered, 1 of the resignations was of a carer who had been a foster to adopt placement, 1 carer due to ill health and the others due to a change in circumstances.

Whilst the figures for new recruitment are not as high as we would have liked this has to be considered within the context of the challenges during the past 12 months and particularly related to the pandemic. We have undertaken comparator work across GM. and the drop in approvals is mirrored across the Northwest and Greater Manchester as demonstrated in the tables below.

Initial Enquiries

	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Aug-21	Sept-21	Oct-21	Nov-21	Dec-21
GM	140	171	191	170	150	229	220	143	170
Trafford	16	10	9	13	7	24	24	25	25
Stockport	22	28	21	19	20	17	20	17	19
Salford	8	8	15	23	9	6	6	4	5
Bury	15	13	15	11	16	7	24	13	22

Initial Visits

	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Aug-21	Sept-21	Oct-21	Nov-21	Dec-21
GM	24	28	37	30	33	26	32	23	14
Trafford	1	3	2	1	1	1	3	2	0
Stockport	3	4	5	2	3	2	7	3	0

Salford	3	1	5	5	1	2	1	1	0
Bury	2	3	2	1	5	4	1	2	3

Applications

	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Aug-21	Sept-21	Oct-21	Nov-21	Dec-21
GM	14	16	15	11	19	15	12	10	7
Trafford	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0
Stockport	0	3	1	1	2	0	1	2	1
Salford	2	0	1	2	4	2	1	0	0
Bury	0	1	0	0	1	3	0	2	2

Assessments

	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Aug-21	Sept-21	Oct-21	Nov-21	Dec-21
GM	88	84	85	82	87	82	78	75	66
Trafford	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	3
Stockport	0	4	1	1	2	0	1	1	0
Salford	3	2	3	3	4	4	2	0	0
Bury	5	2	2	4	5	8	7	7	6

Approvals

	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21	Aug-21	Sept-21	Oct-21	Nov-21	Dec-21
GM	9	16	12	11	10	11	10	12	10
Trafford	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Stockport	3	1	1	2	1	1	3	2	0
Salford	1	2	2	0	2	0	2	0	1
Bury	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

4. Support, Innovation and Collaborative Practice.

Project Fostering

During the early part of the pandemic our focus with existing carers was to continue providing effective communication, support and build emotional resilience. The pandemic also enabled us to start thinking about our strategies to utilize existing foster carers who may have space to take on additional children through the use of spare rooms in their homes.

We have been working locally and across GM to improve recruitment. Our work with GMCA has enabled us to have a collaborative approach in respect of the recruitment, retention, and utilization of foster carers.

Over the past few months, we have launched our Project Fostering Improvement Plan:



5. Project Fostering
Action Plan.xlsx

This is our plan to modernise our fostering service and to improve our Recruitment, Retention and Utilization. This plan is overseen by a Project Fostering Board, which reports to the Corporate and Director on a monthly basis. The Board is chaired but the HOS Provider Services and we have foster carer representation on both the board and on the steering groups that sit below the board including our Equality and Diversity Group and our Allegations Management Group. Most importantly we continue to work with our existing foster carers to encourage them to spread the word about fostering. Our foster carers are more engaged in the service and there is a sense that the Project

Fostering Plan and engagement of carers in the Board and Steering groups has given them a real voice and they can start to see the impact of the modernisation work even though we are at an early stage, feedback has been positive.

Support Groups

We have strengthened our support offer to our foster carers by refreshing our support groups. Our Mainstream Foster carers support group has been going strong and continues to be monthly this remains virtual for now, however we are hoping to resume face to face meetings later this year, most groups have a guest speaker.

The Training Officer has rolled out an additional support group- *Men Who Care*. We have an abundance of positive male role models / carers however they do tend to still be the secondary carer and/or are supported by female SSW for example. The Men's group provides a safe space for men to talk. Fostering Network has provided advice and guidance, and this also links into Men's Mental Health more generally. Strengthening our offer to our existing foster carers will help with our retention moving forward.

Room Maker Project

In March 2021, GMCA (Greater Manchester Combined Authority) hosted a survey of foster carers, to enable LAs to get a better understanding of the property and housing circumstances that might affect carer's ability to be able to care for more children and young people.

Over 900 foster carers responded which represents around 60% of all the mainstream Local Authority foster carers across Greater Manchester. The insights we received have helped to shape our thinking in how we might be able to support foster carers develop / expand their homes to help create additional space for fostering. Each LA contributed 10 k to the project to be utilised by their LA carers. Room maker provided funding and support for those foster carers who wanted to renovate an existing spare room in order to foster another child or young person.

Room maker was very successful in Trafford, and we had four sets of carers who made successful bids for funding through the project to enable them to utilise a spare room and take additional children. The success of this was evident at Christmas when one of the applicants was able to take a young person in an emergency from Kindle

due to the Covid outbreak in our Childrens Residential Units. This proved to be a successful placement and has now become a permanent arrangement enabling the step down of one of our young people from residential to in-house fostering. It is anticipated that when the works are completed on all of the foster carer's homes, we will have created an additional four/five vacancies in-house.

GM Enquiry Hub

The ten local authorities in Greater Manchester are committed to improving the outcomes and life chances of the children and young people who are in our care, and central to this is being able to place more of our children locally, so that they can maintain their links with their family, friends, and community. There is work being undertaken in respect of having a GM wide Enquiry Hub in respect of Fostering Recruitment Enquiries. By working together, LAs are likely to achieve more than if they continued to work in isolation, and by joining forces will be able to compete and boost the recruitment of new foster carers across the region. As part of this project work is being undertaken to identify a partner to lead on the digital requirements to conceive, develop and deliver this campaign.

House Project for Foster Carers

Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council (TMBC), Trafford Housing Trust (THT) and children's charity Coram are working together to explore whether a highly innovative housing solutions scheme can help increase the number of fostering placements the council can offer so that more children can live locally with Trafford council foster carers and thrive in their local communities. This project is part of our fostering sufficiency strategy. At this stage we are undertaking a scoping exercise, aiming to explore whether a housing solutions scheme could help to increase TMBC's in-house fostering capacity and reduce dependence on IFA or residential placements. Briefing sessions have taken place with the Childrens Services Leadership Team and the fostering service social workers have all been briefed. The next stage of the project is to brief our foster carers over the next week. As part of the scoping, we will seek to help determine the benefits to the council, foster carers, and children of such a scheme being implemented and assesses the appetite among carers to foster another child if their home was suitable

If the scheme was to move forward it would involve a rigorous assessment process considering feasibility of a housing solution for eligible mainstream carers who put themselves forward and a fostering team-led assessment of their fostering capacity to determine potential for each carer. A Project Board has been established and we are also in the process of developing a foster carer stakeholder group.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the Covid19 pandemic and over the last 12 months the fostering service has maintained stability across placements for most of our children in care. The service redesign has strengthened our focus on the recruitment and retention of our foster carers, and we are now starting to see the impact of separating out the recruitment and support functions and ensuring an increased focus on each area of work by the respective practice managers.

The work across GM in respect of the Enquiry Hub will increase the reach of all LA's involved and enable a more equitable marketing campaign through collaboration and shared budgets. Coupled with the work with Trafford, Trafford Housing Trust & Coram to increase utilization amongst our existing carers via the House Project for Foster Carers means we are attempting to increase our fostering sufficiency from a range of angles.