

London Borough of Merton
CYP Scrutiny Panel – Briefing Paper

Recruitment of Foster Carers: Sustaining local placements

1. Introduction

1.1 The provision of foster care by a local authority or independent fostering agency is subject to regulation and inspection. The National Minimum Standards Fostering Services, together with Regulations relevant to the placement of children in foster care such as the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (the 2011 Regulations), form the basis of the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 (CSA) for the conduct of fostering services.

1.2 The regulations and standards cover all aspects of the recruitment assessment, approval and on going monitoring of the suitability of foster carers. Merton Fostering service was last inspected in 2007 and was judged to be Good (Ofsted definition).

2. Background

2.1 It is widely recognised that for most children who need to be looked after e.g. in an out of home placement, outcomes are better if they are placed close to home and with resilient, competent, well trained and supported carers. This is best provided within a local area fostering placement.

2.2 Within any local authority area there will be a wide range of need on a continuum as described below:

- Children needing short periods of respite care, such as a short break for a disabled child.
- An emergency admission to support a family in crisis or to resolve behaviour issues as part of a family support plan.
- A longer term period of care to support a teenager no longer able to live at home.
- Placements for children waiting for more permanent arrangements e.g. adoption
- Bail support placements to avoid remands to custody or more expensive out of area placements

2.3 However the national picture is one of a shortage of local fostering placements and local authorities are challenged to improve the local capacity against a backdrop of increasing demand and the need to place children with more complex needs and behaviours. There is a current shortfall of 10,000 foster carers estimated in London and London authorities are in a wider market, competing for carers along with the private and independent sector who are often able to demand high costs to meet the demand and pay carers a premium allowance.

2.5 Not having enough foster carers has huge implications for local authorities and the children who need a placement. It leads directly to a lack of choice of placement for children, foster carers and fostering services. It is likely to increase the chances of a child having to leave the area in which they currently live. It will increase the chance of a child having to move school, and make it more difficult for children to maintain contact with family and friends. It is likely to contribute to placement instability, to poorer outcomes for children and young people and to greater dissatisfaction among foster carers. (Fostering Network. 2006). A shortage of local

provision can invariably lead to out of area placements – particularly for children whose needs are more challenging, being sourced at a higher cost.

3. Improving Merton’s Foster Care Capacity

3.1 Merton is actively addressing this issue and increasing the pool of available and approved foster carers is a key objective for 2011/2012 reflected in the Team Plan. Lean processes already introduced mean the timescale from enquiry to initial visit and application is now reduced. Assessments now take 7 months as opposed to up to 9 months in 2010.

3.2 Local authorities are expected to be able to provide sufficient local placements to need local need (Sufficiency Guidance and Regulations March 2010). The London Borough of Merton is following the regulations and Guidance by increasing recruitment, working within South West London Consortium of local authorities under an arrangement to share carers and working with the third sector to increase short break provision for disabled children.

3.3 A recruitment strategy developed in response to specific demand has been implemented with targeted advertising and events being co-ordinated by an officer whose specific role is fostering recruitment and publicity. There are for example, a steady number of enquiries from carers of African, Asian and African Caribbean backgrounds and this reflects past shortages and the steps taken to address them.

3.4 The arrangement for the Access to Resources Team comes fully into effect in October. The handover of the recruitment and assessment functions to this team will enable foster carer recruitment to become a more discrete function for a specific group of specialist staff. It is expected the exercise of this function will further increase the steady recruitment of carers.

3.5 The separation of functions following the ART implementation allows for the development of a robust supervision and support programme for existing and newly approved carers. It is expected that by delivering a more intensive and timely support framework for carers, more children with complex needs can be placed locally and we will reduce the likelihood of placement breakdowns.

3.6 In order to further improve carer resilience and retention there is a planned series of workshops for foster carers to enable them to complete training portfolios and develop more specific skills.

4). Date and Performance information

4. A summary of key performance data is shown below as at end July 2011

Number of Looked After Children	137	Merton has one of the lowest numbers of children in care compared to child population in England
Number of Looked After Children in Foster Care (%)	86 (63%)	Above National average
% of LAC placed with in house (LBM) Foster Carers	57%	National Average figure not available

Number of active fostering households	30	Plus 5 short break carers – Limited availability usually for disabled children.
Number of potentially available in house placements	64 (Excl. short break respite care)	The true availability is however subject to individual circumstances and matching or risk factors when carers have other children in placement
Number of Assessments already in Progress	6 (3 pending) (2010/11 6 in total)	3 applications in progress which offers a potential gain of up to 9 additional fostering households in 2011/12 Potential 33% increase over 2010/11 where 6 additional carers were approved
Average time scale for application to approval	7 Months (Pre Lean Performance - 9 months)	Statutory Requirement is within 8 months

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