
Children's Services Scrutiny Committee – 11th November 2020

Report of the Acting Director of Children's Services

Fostering and Permanence Service Update Report

Purpose

1. The report provides scope and detail around Dudley's Fostering and Permanence Service

Recommendations

2. It is recommended:
 - That the Committee note and comment on the contents of the update on the Fostering and Permanence Service.

Background

3. The Fostering and Permanence Service provides a family experience for children who are unable to live with their birth families.

In order to achieve this aim, the service is divided into three teams

- The Recruitment and Assessment Team.
- The Mainstream Fostering Support Team.
- The Connected Persons Team.
- The Fostering Panel recommends the approval, continued approval and termination of approval of foster carers.
- Permanence for children looked after is by Special Guardianship Order (SGO), long term fostering and adoption. Adoption for Dudley children is now located within the Regional Adoption Agency - Adoption@Heart (A@H).

- The Fostering and Permanence service provides the interface between DMBC and Adoption@Heart. The service holds regular panels (Permanency Monitoring Panel and Achieving Early Permanence Panel). Membership of Permanency Monitoring Panel includes the family finding manager from Adoption@Heart. The progress of children identified for adoption is tracked and monitored through this panel.

4. Of the 635 children who are currently in the care of Dudley MBC

- 4 children are in Foster to Adopt placements.
- 11 are placed for adoption.
- 182 are placed with internal mainstream foster carers.
- 118 are placed with Connected Persons foster carers.
- 195 are placed with Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) carers

The remainder of the children (125 in total) who are not placed with foster carers are;

- 42 children on Interim Care orders / or Care Orders are placed with their parents with a plan to discharge the orders safely.
- 2 children are in welfare secure units.
- 3 children are in youth offending institute.
- 1 child is placed with a residential school.
- 1 child is in a mother and baby unit with their mother.
- 7 children are placed in Dudley Children's Residential homes.
- 37 children are placed in external residential placements.
- 25 are in Semi-independent living and
- 7 are in independent living.

Therefore almost 50% of Dudley's Looked after children are placed in an in-house fostering provision. A substantial number of these children have a permanency plan of Special Guardianship Orders and progressing these children to this order would enable them to exit the care system. These children would therefore no longer have the interference of the Local Authority in their lives and their Guardians would be able to make important decisions for them allowing them to have a more normal family life.

The Fostering Service consists of three teams which all have discrete functions, although there are overlapping responsibilities and the team managers cover each other's duties;

1. The Recruitment and Assessment Team (R&A) is responsible for the recruitment, training and assessment of foster carers. There are currently three workers in this team who are undertaking ten assessments of people who wish to become foster carers for unrelated children. During the Covid-19 lockdown, pre-approval training and assessments were conducted virtually.

The fourth member of the team is responsible for all private Fostering cases and acts as the link for Non-Agency Adoptions. Private fostering arrangements exist when a child under the age of 16, who is not looked after, goes to live with somebody who is not a close relative. Non-Agency Adoption includes, for example step-parenting adoptions and occur because a carer makes an application to adopt a child.

2. The Mainstream Support team consists of eight social workers who hold cases of between 18 to 20 cases per full time worker. These workers manage and support the foster carers who care for non-related children. These social workers supervise the carers, ensuring that they are offering safe placements for children, are adequately trained and continue to meet fostering standards. One member of the team has lead responsibility for organising carer training. Of the 634 children currently Looked After by DMBC, 180 are cared for by mainstream foster carers. During the Covid-19 lockdown, the larger portion of supervision visits were undertaken virtually, although carers and children were still seen when necessary. Staff advised and supported carers through, sometimes challenging times and worked hard to minimise disruptions.

3. The Connected Persons team is the third team in the service. This team is currently understaffed, due to vacancies. The remit of this team is to oversee the assessment of Connected Persons to become foster carers for children who are known to them, and then to supervise these carers when they become approved foster carers. The plan is for most of these Connected Persons carers to become Special Guardians for the children in their care, and ideally the Connected Person worker would complete the SGO assessment. Post order support for special guardians will be offered by two social workers in this team when the workers have been recruited. Of the 634 children currently Looked After by DMBC, 118 are cared for by Connected Person foster carers. For some connected carers there can be a tension between being a family member and the requirements of being an approved foster carer, for example carers will often say "I just want to be a grandmother". For children living in these arrangements, progression towards a Special Guardianship order will alleviate the tensions between being an approved foster carer and a family member.

The Connected Persons team also receives Initial Viability Assessments (IVA) which is a brief report identifying whether a person may be appropriate for proceeding to assessment or not. This team has a high demand for assessments as well as the supervisions of approved Connected Person carers. Currently, due to staffing issues, most assessments are sourced externally. Permanent recruitment for these vacancies is now underway.

4. The Fostering Service also has a Fostering Panel function. The Panel is maintained and administered by the service, and in accordance with Statutory requirements this is independently chaired.

The Panel Advisor and Panel Administrator are DMBC employees. The Panel recommends the approval, termination and review of foster carers, prior to decisions being made by the Agency Decision Maker. Dudley MBC has not opted to use the flexibilities provided by the Adoption Coronavirus legislation, given that the quoracy of panel has not been affected by the pandemic. This has been shared and accepted by Ofsted at the recent Assurance visit. Fostering Panel continues to meet fortnightly.

5. Emotional Health and Wellbeing services are provided by Dudley Lighthouse Links via a Service Level Agreement. Services have continued virtually through the lockdown, with some face-to-face contact taking place in premises such as schools. It has not been possible to deliver virtual training during this period, but young people have been provided with boxes which included equipment and activities for improving their mental health and with ongoing virtual contact where appropriate.
6. The Fostering Service maintains the link between the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) Adoption@Heart (A@H).
7. In order to monitor children whose plan is adoption, Dudley MBC have implemented Achieving Early Permanence meetings which will now take place weekly. At this meeting we consider all forms of permanence including Long Term Fostering and Special Guardianship. This includes ensuring that early notifications to the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) is made for those children whose plan is adoption, to enable early adoption planning to commence timely.
8. In place is a Permanency Monitoring Meeting, attended by the RAA, which is moving to a fortnightly frequency to enable permanency to continue to be tracked and monitored. The purpose of this is to prevent drift and delay in adoption and ensure that both agencies are proactive in undertaking the required actions.
9. The Panel Advisor and the Family Finder from the RAA have regular interface meetings to pick up actions from the Permanency Monitoring Meetings. The

Panel Advisor role is to provide advice where foster carers wish to adopt children in their care.

10. The Service Manager attends the Operational group of RAA to ensure that there is management focus on permanency.

11. We currently have:

- 15 children with Adoption Orders who are awaiting placements.
- 9 children who have a SHOBPA (Should Be Placed for Adoption) waiting for Placement Orders
- 4 children in Fostering for Adoption placements (Early Permanency)
- 11 children who are placed for adoption.

Finance

5. There are no cost implications arising from this report

Law

6. There are no legal implications arising from this report

Equality Impact

7. The fostering service seeks to recruit foster carers from all backgrounds who are able to meet the needs of the children of Dudley. Applicants from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, sexuality, disability and marital status are welcome.

8. The provision of a resilient and diverse fostering service is essential to the wellbeing and stability of children and young people. We endeavour to recruit carers who are able to meet the needs of children who are in care and this includes carers who reflect the cultural background of the children.

Human Resources/Organisational Development

9. There are no organisational development/HR or transformational implications arising from this report.

Commercial/Procurement

10. There are no commercial/procurement implications arising from this report

Health, Wellbeing and Safety

11. Children who are placed in resilient, supported foster homes will have their needs met and will be enabled to fulfil their potential. A number of children will be able to achieve permanency by remaining with their current carers and exiting the care system via SGO.



Helen Ellis
Acting Director of Children's Services

Contact Officer:

Menna Davies – Service Manager Fostering, Permanence and Emotional Well Being
Telephone: 01384 817030
Email: menna.davies@dudley.gov.uk