

Children and Education Select Committee
26 March 2015

Fostering and Adoption Services

Purpose of the report: Scrutiny of Services

To scrutinise Adoption Agency and Fostering Service activity as presented in the Annual Reports

To note the Statements of Purpose for both Adoption and Fostering Services as required

Introduction:

1. For both Adoption and Fostering services, the Statements of Purpose and the Annual reports highlight the breadth of activity undertaken to serve the needs of looked after children who require care when they cannot live with their birth family. This includes services when a permanent alternative family is needed, whether through adoption, special guardianship or long-term fostering.
2. Both descriptive and performance data is provided to enable the Select Committee to perform its scrutiny role.

Annual Reports

3. The annual reports for both Adoption and Fostering Services provide a comprehensive overview of the services that have been provided.
4. For each service, both locally and nationally, there have been significant changes and developments to ensure continuous improvements in the ways we collectively care for some of our most vulnerable children.

Adoption

5. In terms of performance, 2013-14 saw the highest number of orders, either Adoption (59) or Special Guardianship (65), being made for children from our care. This is in line with national trends, and evidences

the strong emphasis there is on ensuring timely and permanent plans for children as they grow up.

6. In order to meet the challenges of placing children with the right families as they grow up, it is essential to ensure there is a good choice of prospective adopters available to provide the best possible match.
7. One of the main changes through recent legislation has been in the timescales and process for recruiting and assessing adults who wish to become adopters. We have evidenced strong performance in this area through the high numbers of prospective adopters who have been approved.
8. However, this area of our services cannot be measured only through performance data. An essential component is the quality of the experience, as felt by both those adults who are assessed by us and by the outcomes for the children in our care.
9. The needs provided for by our Adoption service do not stop once the prospective adopters have been approved or an order has been granted, but continue through the provision of post-adoption and post-order services.
10. As the numbers of orders have risen, and as the complexity of the needs of adopters and children are changing, there is an increasing demand for these services. This is a developing area of provision, to meet both local and national requirements
11. We have strong engagement and involvement with our adopters, through support groups, service development and peer support and have extended this range of engagement to include children who have been adopted to ensure their views and voices are heard.

Fostering

12. In total throughout 2013-14 our Fostering Service provided placements for 721 children and supported 600+ carers. Within this service the type of care provided can range from placement with general foster carers -- who would not be known to the children before they are placed with them -- to Family and Friends placements, where a member of the extended family may be assessed to be a foster carer.
13. The service is working to widen and develop the placements they provide through a focus on targeted and specialist schemes such as Enhanced carers, Short break carers for children with disabilities and Parent and Child placements as examples.
14. One of the strongest themes for all placements is to provide stability for children and it has been a major area of work to improve children's experiences and outcomes by reducing the number of moves they need to make.

15. Children may need to move, including being placed out of county and at a distance, if there are not the right carers available to match their needs, or if carers are not provided and developing the right skills to meet the needs of children with challenging behaviour.
16. The main priorities of the service have therefore been on working to address these issues.
17. A project to improve our recruitment of carers is now underway, with a specific focus on increasing the numbers of carers we have to provide care for children from targeted groups such as teenagers, sibling groups and those with higher or more complex needs.
18. We are one of six local authorities / fostering agencies who are piloting a four year programme supported by the Fostering Network. This is a national programme intended to implement the approach of social pedagogy within our fostering service to make a difference to the quality and depth of our care for children.
19. This project is called Head, Heart and Hands to reflect the way in which Social Pedagogy is an approach that works with the whole child. It draws together the physical, social, emotional, creative and spiritual needs in the relationship between the primary carers and the child. There is a strong emphasis on relationships and working with all aspects of the child's development and less on the style of procedural led care that has been more traditional in Britain.
20. We are particularly committed to improving stability for children placed in foster care through empowering our foster carers in day to day decision-making and care for the children they look after. Through this programme foster carers are developing increased skills and a different way of thinking about and working with the children we place with them. Shared activities become a vital part of developing relationships and close attachments between carer and child, enabling them to provide essential support for the child as they grow up.
21. Children's and carers views are viewed as an integral part of our service and service development, with foster carer support groups, engagement and attendance at our Corporate Parenting groups and strong links with the Children's Rights and Participation Service, including representation on our Foster Panels.

Statements of Purpose

22. These incorporate a statement of principles which underpin the work of the services, outlines of activity, management and staffing and accountability.
23. These documents are completed by the service in line with Regulations and the National Minimum Standards for each service area.

Conclusions:

24. Both Adoption and Fostering Services are working to a high level, with a strong focus on increasing capacity to provide for children's needs in a variety of ways and in ensuring they meet their regulation requirements and standards
25. Additionally they are working to ensure that users' views, whether as children or adults, are at the heart of services and service improvements

Recommendations:

26. The Committee is asked to receive and scrutinise the Annual reports and the Statements of Purpose for the Adoption and Fostering Services and consider what recommendations it would wish to make.

Next steps:

To implement any recommendations as required

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Sources/background papers:

Adoption Annual Report 2013-14
Adoption Statement of Purpose
Fostering Annual Report 2013-14
Fostering Statement of Purpose
Adoption Services Regulations (2011)
Fostering Services Regulations (2011)