

## CORPORATE PARENTING REPORT

### Gloucestershire's Fostering Service

Gloucestershire's foster carers are an integral part of the professional network responsible for our children in care. They play a vital role in terms of ensuring their day-to-day needs are met, their plans are progressed and desired outcomes achieved.

The Sufficiency Strategy specifies the importance of achieving '*Right Placement First Time*' for as many Gloucestershire children as possible when they need to be cared for away from home. It sets a target to achieve (by end March 2022) 80% of all children who are living with foster carers, to be placed with Gloucestershire foster carers, with the remaining 20% placed with independent carers. This is a reasonable and achievable ratio which will result in more children in care living within Gloucestershire's boundaries, therefore enabling us to support them more effectively. It will also result in reduced expenditure due to reduced reliance on external placements and also provide the potential to place more children with particularly complex needs in foster care, who may otherwise be placed in a residential environment.

In order to achieve the 80:20 ratio, incremental targets have been set for a net increase in the number of fostering households over this and the next two financial years. The target is 30 households per year, the expectation being that a net growth of 90 households (from 1 April 2019) will be established by end of March 2022. Not only is the aim to achieve the 80:20 split, but also to ensure there is choice of placement within in-house provision to ensure carers' skills, experiences and resources are the best match with children's presenting needs.

The population of children in care in Gloucestershire continues to rise. At the end of March 2019 there were 716 compared to 650 at the same time last year – a growth of just over 9%.

The population of foster carer households reached 296 at the end of March this year which is a net increase of 28 compared to the number of households at the same time last year – a growth of just over 10%. Nationally there has been a slow decline in fostering approvals with a 1% reduction on average compared to the same time last year. Nationally the number of children in foster care has risen to 53,000 which is an increase of 1000 since the same time last year.

If the care population remains relatively static or slightly increases in Gloucestershire, the target set above will enable us to achieve the 80:20 split within the next 3 years. At the end of March this year, of all those children placed with foster carers, 71% were placed with Gloucestershire carers, compared to 68% this time last year. A 3% increase year on year will enable us to reach the target. It is

important that the growth in the foster care population over the 3 year period exceeds the growth in the care population.

### **Recruitment**

During 2018/19 the fostering service received 312 enquiries from people interested in fostering and an additional 168 requests for information. We know that generally, those who are thinking about becoming foster carers take some considerable time weighing up the costs and benefits of doing so before they take the decision and apply. Therefore the key is for the fostering service to be proactive in keeping in touch with those who have made enquiries. Of all those who became approved as new foster carers in 2018/19, 22 households (7%) were those who had made a previous enquiry.

As referenced above, there was a net increase of 28 fostering households over the year. In total, 70 households were approved, which includes 31 general carers<sup>1</sup> and 39 family or friends carers<sup>2</sup>. It is usual and often for very good reason, that foster carers stop fostering. This can be because they were caring for a relative (who goes home or becomes 18); the carer is granted a Special Guardianship Order or adopts the child. Often it may be the case that for personal reasons a carer stops fostering. There are many reasons for this but the most common are due to retirement, separation or other family commitments. Turnover of carers is usual, therefore ongoing and active recruitment of new carers is imperative in order to increase the cohort.

The conversion rate from the point of enquiry to approval was 9.6% in 2018/19 compared to 6.6% in the previous financial year. This is high compared to some of our regional neighbours. It is not possible to compare this with a national conversion rate as this has not been collected since 2015 when it was 10%. The priority is to seek applications from people who are able to care for sibling groups, teenagers and children with disabilities. These are all difficult to place groups and it is for this reason that it is important to work in partnership with independent providers with whom we have contractual arrangements to source this type of provision now and in the future.

### **Investment**

Support to carers is crucial in order to retain them and ensure they are equipped with the skills and knowledge to care for our children. Given the expected growth in the carer cohort it has been acknowledged there is a requirement to invest in the service in order to support that increased growth. As a result approval has been granted to recruit additional staff within the service to ensure support to carers is not compromised. There are many ways in which the service supports foster carers and feedback indicates Gloucestershire carers value this support. Ongoing training is key

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<sup>1</sup> Those who are approved for fostering children they do not know

<sup>2</sup> Known as Connected People who care for children they already know and are approved specifically for them

and regular supervision of carers ensures individual development is addressed as appropriate. There are 11 support groups established around the County which are well attended. The focus for these are for peer support and training. A schedule of these support groups is available should any County Councillor wish to attend a group, meet carers and staff and find out more about what's happening 'on the front line'.

**Cllr Richard Boyles**

**Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member – Children's Safeguarding & Early Years**