Recruitment Strategy – where are we now?

Fostering is one of the most varied, rewarding and challenging jobs you can do; at Gloucestershire County Council we are always looking for more foster carers who can make a difference to local children’s lives. We want to provide our children and young people with stable homes built on love. In Gloucestershire, there are over 870 children and young people in care who need a loving, stable and nurturing home. Foster carers can offer that stability to a child while they can’t live with their birth families and this could be in the short-term or throughout their childhood. In return, our foster carers receive a generous allowance, ongoing training and supervision and the support they need to ensure a child in their care can reach their potential and thrive.

The national picture
The children’s social care system is under “extreme stress” (Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, May 2022). In 2015, 69,000 children in England were looked after by councils - by March 2020, the figure was 80,080. Projections estimate that it could reach 95,000 (County Councils Network, November 2021; Independent Review, May 2022).

The number of children looked after is set to continue to rise, without reform of social care

Guardian graphic. Source: The independent review of children’s social care
There is a national shortage of foster carers (The Fostering Network, 2022), meaning that some children are not getting the right care from their placement. Some children are also being placed too far away from where they previously lived or in placements that require them to be separated from their brothers and sisters (Competition and Markets Authority, March 2021).

Ofsted reports that 79% of initial enquiries to foster in 2020-21 went to IFAs (November 2021). Competition to recruit foster carers in Gloucestershire is fierce, with many independent fostering agencies actively recruiting within the region. These include Foster Care Associates (FCA), Compass Fostering, Foster Plus, ISP, Capstone Foster Care, Blue Sky Fostering, Five Rivers and Nexus Fostering.

The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care has released its findings and calls upon government to “immediately launch a new national foster carer recruitment programme, to approve 9,000 new foster carers over three years so that children in care can live in family environments” (May 2022). The government has responded by committing to “working with local authorities to boost efforts to recruit more foster carers, ensuring children have access to the right placements at the right time” (DfE, May 2022).

The current economic climate, with the long-term impact of the pandemic, rising poverty and the cost-of-living crisis, is a difficult one for vulnerable families, which could contribute to the pressure on the social care system. At the same time, the jobs market is buoyant, and jobs remain unfilled, which historically has a negative impact on enquiries to foster.

There is an aging population of foster carers. Nationally, two-thirds of carers were aged over 50, with a quarter over 60. Younger carers have higher levels of occupancy than older carers. (Ofsted, March 2020)

Around 20% of fostering households leave the system each year (Ofsted, March 2020) and 30% of deregistered fostering households were deregistered within two years of their approval (Ofsted, March 2021). Retention is the best form of recruitment and is vital in ensuring that the pool of in-house foster carers grows and does not remain static or reduce overall (LGA Communications, January 2019).

The local picture

At the time of writing, there are 875 children in care in Gloucestershire.

In 2021/2022 there were 734 requests for fostering homes. We identified homes for 66% of these requests and 54% of these were used.

57% of requests were for children under 11 years old (a 10% increase on the previous financial year) and 43% were for children and young people over the age of 11.

We were only able to identify homes for 29% of parent and child requests, a significantly lower percentage than for other types of fostering.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Request Type</th>
<th>Number requested</th>
<th>Number identified</th>
<th>Number used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All requests</td>
<td>734</td>
<td>482 (66%)</td>
<td>396 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 11s</td>
<td>420 (57% of total)</td>
<td>291 (69%)</td>
<td>223 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenagers / over 11s</td>
<td>315 (43% of total)</td>
<td>191 (61%)</td>
<td>173 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent and Child</td>
<td>41 (5.6% of total)</td>
<td>12 (29%)</td>
<td>10 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brothers and sisters</td>
<td>306 (42% of total)</td>
<td>211 (69%)</td>
<td>159 (52%)</td>
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**SWOT Analysis**

**Strengths**
- Strong focus on local foster carers for local children / big fostering family.
- Not for profit status.
- Local support and training, and strong training offer.
- Regular children for foster carers and a wide age range of children.
- CAMHS offer to new foster carers.
- Contribution of fostering champions.

**Weaknesses**
- Limited budget to spend on marketing to attract new foster carers to Gloucestershire County Council in comparison to a local Independent Fostering Agencies.
- Historically there has been lack of a consistent focus on retention of the foster carers we currently have. This is now being addressed via a retention working group made up of foster carers, staff and Ambassadors working together to agree the ongoing support package for carers and how this can be marketed and advertised in the future.
Opportunities
- Increase in marketing budget to allow for more wide-reaching campaign.
- Foster carer recruitment seen as a higher national and corporate priority.
- New support structure enhancing locality-based recruitment activity.
- Greater support and involvement of strategic partners.
- National recruitment campaign as a result of independent review.
- Exit interviews for foster carers are now in place to provide qualitative information to support the retention strategy.
- Economic environment as families may look to boost their income by becoming foster carers.

Threats
- Continued growth in numbers of children in care.
- Ongoing competition from IFAs and how they can enhance their offer.
- Impact of the Homes for Ukraine scheme as potential applicants may delay their application to foster and offer a home to families from Ukraine instead.
- Economic environment could also be a threat as potential applicants may delay becoming a foster carer due to family members moving home, lack of space, etc.

Vision and SMART Objectives - where do we want to be?

Our vision is to be the foster care agency of choice for anyone in Gloucestershire enquiring to foster.

Objectives

1. We will recruit a net increase of 120 new carers in the next three financial years, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS</th>
<th>ACTUAL APPROVALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2022/2023</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023/2024</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2024/2025</td>
<td>40</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Retention of existing foster carers

As well as recruiting new foster carers, it is imperative we maintain and support the existing cohort of foster carers we already have. The Core Offer to Foster Carers details the support, training and development opportunities available to all carers and this has been developed in conjunction with our foster carers and partners. The Fostering Service Retention Plan details how the service will continue to offer the best possible support to all carers and also identify improvements needed.
It is recognised that developing our offer is an ongoing action and we will ensure that partnership working with other local authority recruitment and retention fostering teams continues so that we can learn and support each other; this also has the added advantage of sharing costs.

The current attrition rate will continue to be monitored: nationally turnover of foster carers is 13-14%, (Fostering Network, 2022) however it would be beneficial to set an aspirational annual target for retention of foster carers. The reasons for carers leaving GCC Fostering Service also need to be considered as a churn of carers leaving to join IFAs is very different to carers leaving due to retirement or personal circumstance changes. This qualitative data should become more apparent as an exit interview process was introduced in 2022.

**Strategy – which way is best?**

Given the competitive climate in which the fostering service operates, it is essential to take an approach to recruitment that highlights what the council can offer that independent fostering agencies (IFAs) cannot, such as a close working link with the local CAMHS service which offers consultation support to foster carers when they need it; discounts for Gloucestershire County Council foster carers for local shops, attractions, activities, etc.; flexible ways to access local training and local support groups. It is also important to compete in the same places that IFAs recruit, particularly online. This means continuing to adopt a digital first approach.

The council should continue appealing to its core audience of those in their 40s and 50s (who are most likely to be approved as foster carers), while also considering new audiences, such as younger people and those who are LGBTQ+. New survey data shows 6% of 18- to 34-year-olds are currently considering becoming a foster carer (Social Market Foundations, August 2021). LGBTQ+ foster carers are more likely to care for brothers and sisters and children with disabilities (New Family Social, March 2022).

**Tactics – how might we get there?**

The list below outlines the key tactics we will employ in fostering recruitment over the next three years. These will be used to inform marketing action plans.

1. Improve the enquirer experience, increase our contact with prospective foster carers and imitate the success of IFAs. This will include an increase in contact points with prospective foster carers at the early enquiry stage and ensure that we are ruling them in rather than ruling them out.
2. Improve the design and navigation of the GCC Fostering website so that the customer experience mirrors IFA competitors’ sites.
3. Plan and deliver one large scale recruitment campaign per year employing the full marketing mix and delivered in conjunction with Corporate Communications team. Foster carers, fostering
champions and ambassadors will be involved in the design of the campaign to test and shape the messages. These will then be used across all marketing platforms to raise brand awareness, recognition and trust in the local authority Fostering Service.

4. Produce Marketing Plan at a Glance to detail all marketing activity in a six-month period.

5. Adopt a bespoke strategy for each locality to enhance the model of working and share ownership for the recruitment task.

6. Develop a specific marketing strategy for parent and child foster carers, in conjunction with the Fostering Panel, to establish criteria.

7. Adopt a whole council approach to recruitment, with the support of the Corporate Parenting Board and Transformation Project Strategic Board.

8. Make greater use of corporate partners and their communications channels to staff and service users.

9. Develop an internal marketing strategy, with an emphasis on the new Fostering Friendly policy and Refer a Friend scheme.

10. Explore new audiences, including younger people and LGBTQ+.

**Resources**

There is an annual budget of £90,000. There is a full-time marketing and communications officer and a full-time support worker, who also has responsibility for supporting the Foster Care Training Coordinator.

**Monitoring progress – how are we doing?**

To monitor progress towards achieving our objectives, we will:

- Produce monthly monitoring reports detailing number of approvals and enquiries and progress through the assessment process.

- Produce quarterly reports showing marketing activity and progress towards the annual target.

- Produce an end of year review to assess the full year’s performance and report on recruitment against the annual target.

- Meet six-weekly with the in-house placement finding team and fostering recruitment team managers to ensure that we are recruiting to address placement demand and to identify any changes in placement demand.
• Meet six-weekly with the corporate communications team to keep them informed and engaged in delivery the strategy.

• Report six-monthly to the Strategic Transformation Board to report on progress and gain support for and ownership of the strategy.

Lisa Long, Service Manager for Permanence

March 2023