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Appendix A

# Recruitment and retention strategy

Fostering Service

1<sup>st</sup> April 2018 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019



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## 1) Introduction

The Fostering Network (the UK's leading fostering charity) states that a child comes into care in need of a foster family every twenty minutes with 7000 new fostering families needed in the UK (Fostering Network Foster Care Fortnight statistics for Local Authorities, 2018).

According to the Fostering in England 2016 – 2017 main findings report, nationally the number of approved foster places continues to rise. However, while the number of places did rise, the number of places that were unavailable for children to be placed into increased at a faster rate. This in effect meant that there were fewer places for children who needed foster care than last year.

The number of households and therefore the number of carers continued to steadily decrease, driven by the fall in mainstream (known as career carer) households. This would have been the biggest decrease in households in recent years but for the large increase in family and friend's households. However, if the decrease in mainstream households continues, along with a continued increase in children in care, there is a risk that the sector will reach a point where there are not enough suitable places available.

The above research and statistical information highlights the need for positive and proactive recruitment. This Recruitment and Retention Strategy outlines the current need and the successes and learning found through analysis of the last years activities and the recruitment targets for the year ahead. It gives an overview of the key marketing initiatives and targeted campaigns that the Service will be undertaking for the year ahead.

## 2) Needs analysis and evaluation

### 2.1) Introduction to the population of Central Bedfordshire

Central Bedfordshire is less diverse than England as a whole with a greater proportion of people in Central Bedfordshire who are White British (89.7%). The biggest ethnic groups within Central Bedfordshire are White Other (2.8%), White Irish (1.2%) and Indian (1%). (Central Bedfordshire Key Facts and Figures, January 2017).

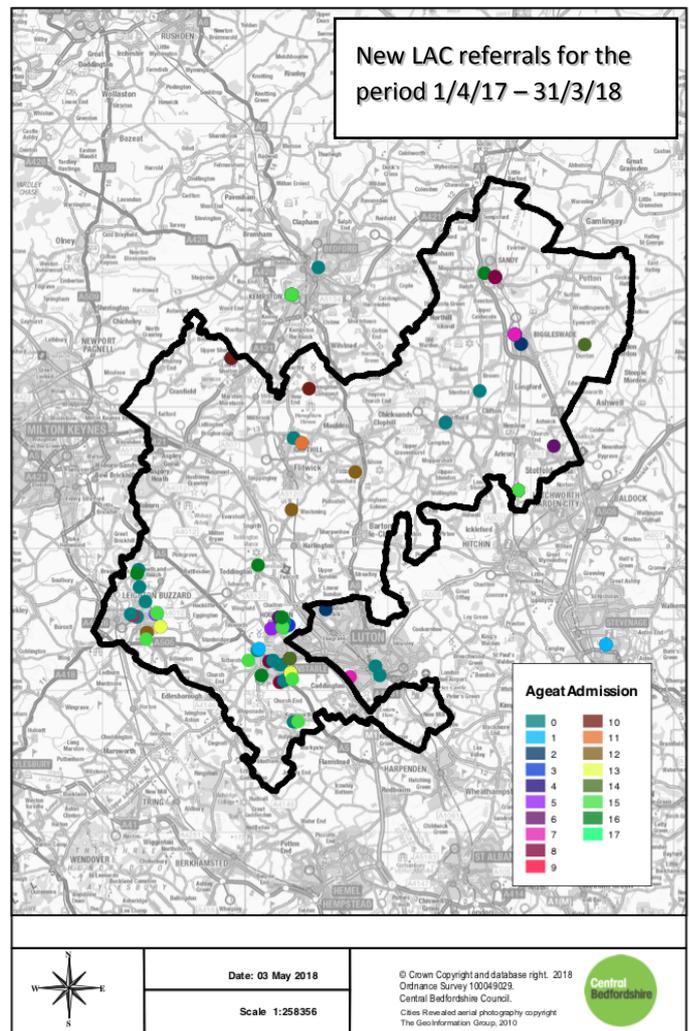
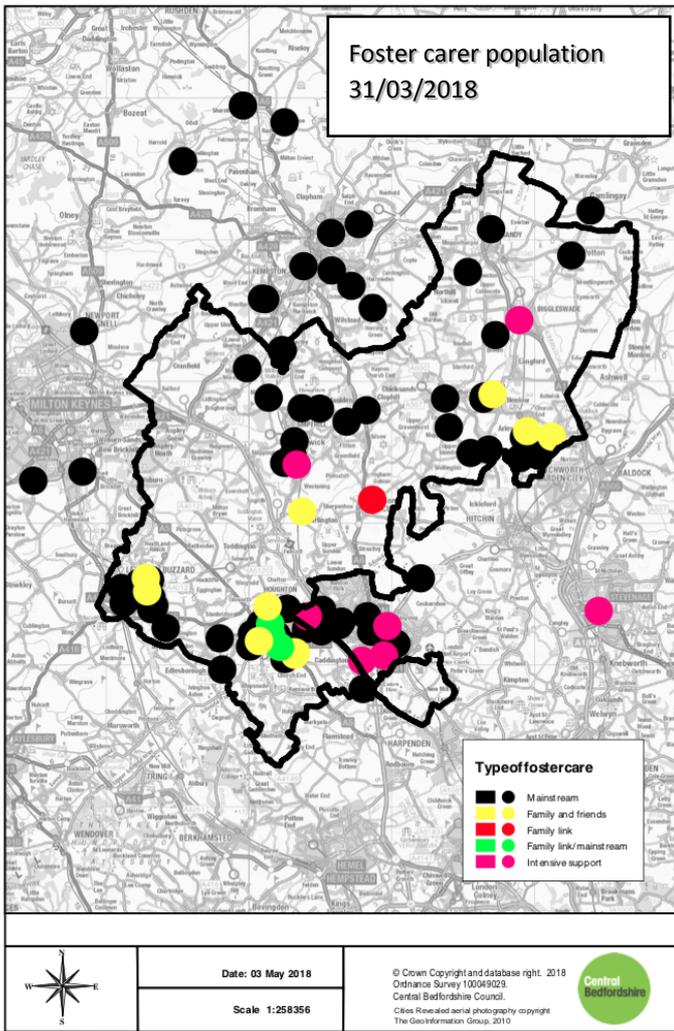
### 2.2) Location of looked after children and foster carers

With Central Bedfordshire being classed as largely rural it was important to gain further information regarding:

- a) The areas that the Service's looked after children are coming from
- b) The areas in which the Service has foster carers.

The following maps show that the Service has foster carers spread across the whole of Central Bedfordshire, with some from outside the Central Bedfordshire borders. The main population of looked after children are shown to be coming from the south of Central Bedfordshire:





### 2.3) Current picture of foster carers

Part of the analysis for this strategy was to gain a clearer picture of the Service's current foster carers, their ages, and what encouraged them to contact Central Bedfordshire Council to enquire about fostering. This will enable the Service to capture any trends for better targeting for future advertising campaigns.

#### 2.3a) Average age of Central Bedfordshire foster carers

With a national concern of an ageing population of foster carers with 10 – 15% due to retire in the next 5 years (Fostering Network State of the Nation's Foster Care, 2016) it was important for the Service to review the average age of Central Bedfordshire foster carers and if there is a need to focus on recruiting younger foster carers.

From research undertaken, the age of foster carers for Central Bedfordshire is not a high concern with the majority of foster carers being aged between 40 – 54 years:

- 22% are aged 40 - 54 years
- 18% are aged 45 – 49 years
- 17% are aged 50 – 54 years
- As a whole, the youngest foster carer is 23 years and the eldest is 76 years.



### 2.3b) Approved foster carer conversion of enquiry

During the research enquiries were revisited for current foster carers to see what encouraged them to come forward as foster carers. Although this information for some carers was not available due to the length of their fostering career, it was clear that word of mouth was the most popular reason for them to contact Central Bedfordshire Council. This indicates that foster carers being part of the recruitment strategy remains a high priority.

When compared with the outcomes for 2016, it is evident that there is an increased knowledge by foster carers being able to transfer between authorities and agencies. There was a good number of foster carers transferring to Central Bedfordshire with 8% transferring from an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) and 1.1% transferring from another Local Authority.

Foster carer enquiry conversion	2018	2016	Difference from 2016 to 2018
Unknown	31.0%	42.7%	- 11.7
Word of mouth/friends who foster	17.2%	19.5%	- 2.3
IFA transfer	8.0%	0%	+ 8
Website	6.9%	4.9%	+ 2
Radio advert	4.6%	4.9%	- 0.3
Internet search	4.6%	3.7%	+ 0.9
Local paper	3.4%	6.1%	- 2.7
Word of mouth - staff member	3.4%	1.2%	+ 2.2
Advert - location not specified	3.4%	2.4%	+ 1
Attended info evening	3.4%	1.2%	+ 2.2
School bus advert	2.3%	2.4%	- 0.1
Referred to us by another LA	2.3%	2.4%	- 0.1
Previously fostered for the LA	2.3%	2.4%	- 0.1
Outreach	2.3%	1.2%	+ 1.1
LA transfer	1.1%	0%	+ 1.1
Roundabout	1.1%	3.7%	- 2.6
Previously a Reg 24 carer	1.1%	0%	+ 1.1
Early years newsletter	1.1%	1.2%	- 0.1

### 2.4) Looked after children

The Service has continued to place a high number of children with in house foster carers and are keen to work towards the aspiration to have 70% of the Looked after children (LAC) population placed with in house foster carers and therefore reduce the cost and use of independent fostering agencies (IFA).

This has proved challenging with the LAC population rising year on year but the in house to IFA split remains high with 61% of the LAC population being placed with in house foster carers and 39% with IFA's (as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018). This is good compared to Central Bedfordshire Council's 2014 figure which was 46%. It has now stabilised in the low 60% but with a robust recruitment and retention strategy the Service is confident this figure will continue to rise.



In order to gain a good understanding of the types of foster carers that are needed, a breakdown of referrals for placements for looked after children was analysed. This analysis focussed on those children placed outside their family and friends network and accordingly both family and friends and Regulation 24 placements were excluded from the analysis. From this analysis, it is evident that the following areas are in need of active recruitment during 2018 – 2019 (further information on our current need can be found in section four):

- Fostering households for sibling groups
- Fostering households for older children aged 10 years plus
- Parent and child foster carers
- Respite foster carers.

The following shows a snapshot of the results from the analysis:

**New referrals placed with in house foster carers**

- 41 new referrals were placed with in house foster carers:
  - 18 were aged between 0 – 2 years (White British, White British/Italian and White British/Asian)
  - 4 were aged between 3 – 5 years (White British and Asian British)
  - 9 were aged between 6 – 10 years (White British, Black British and Black African)
  - 9 were aged between 11 – 15 years including 3 unaccompanied young people seeking asylum (White British, Black African, Eritrean and Afghan)
  - 1 placement was a parent and child (White British).

**New referrals placed with Independent Fostering Agencies:**

- 22 new referrals were placed with IFA foster carers
  - 3 children were aged between 0 – 2 years (White British and Asian British)
  - 4 children were aged between 3 – 5 years (White British and Asian British)
  - 7 children were aged between 6 – 10 years (White British and Asian British)
  - 7 young people were aged between 11 – 15 years, including one unaccompanied young person seeking asylum (White British, White British/Arab, Asian British, Sudanese)
  - 1 placement was a parent and child (White British).

The reasons for the above external placements were:

- Older child and no in-house option available
- Respite required and no in-house option available
- Sibling group and no in-house option available
- Parent and child placement and no in-house option available
- Placed out of county.

During this time, 19 placements were brought back in house to Central Bedfordshire from an IFA through planned moves to Central Bedfordshire foster carers, being placed with family and friends or Regulation 24 carers or where IFA carers transferred to Central Bedfordshire with Central Bedfordshire children in placement.



The need for foster carers for unaccompanied young people seeking asylum (UASC) continues with Central Bedfordshire reaching their 0.7% threshold. This is due to the high number of spontaneous arrivals into the region at Toddington Service Station. As the young people move onto independence the Service will be able to provide further placements for UASC and will continue to ensure that caring for UASC is promoted to both prospective and approved foster carers during the year ahead.

### 2.5) Evaluation of activities in 2017 – 2018

This year has seen the Service meet its recruitment target for the fourth consecutive year with the following approvals:

- 10 x career fostering households
- 1 x family and friends foster carer approved as a career foster carer
- 2 x supported lodgings households.

The trend of IFA carers expressing an interest to transfer from their current IFA to Central Bedfordshire has continued this year with a good number of initial contacts and enquiries. Four of the above approvals were IFA transfers, all of which were caring for Central Bedfordshire children (seven children in total) which resulted in a considerable saving in IFA fees to the service.

Last year, there were a total of 393 initial contacts for information regarding fostering. Compared with the previous year's figure of 299, this has increased significantly by 31%.

The following shows the progress of this year's cohort of initial contacts so far (as we progress through their applications these figures may change):

April 2017 – March 2018		Comparison; figures for 2016 – 2017
Initial contact for information regarding fostering	393	299
Completion of the initial enquiry form	110	105
Went forward for initial visit	56	64
Application forms sent to prospective foster carers	46	53
Application forms returned	27	26
Number that went forward to assessment	27	24
Number of assessments that cancelled out	12	10
Reasons why those assessments were cancelled out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not willing to complete employment reference</li> <li>- Reached the end of the supported lodgings assessment and department unable to contact applicant. No indication of wanting to end assessment</li> </ul>	

- Concerns around applicant's ability to set appropriate boundaries
- Medical required before assessment can begin, medical not completed by two separate applicants
- Applicant's did not engage with assessment
- Personal reasons – decided to move to a new house and try for a baby
- Employment, lost their job so ended the assessment
- Applicant no longer wished to proceed
- Health issues
- Not willing to complete ex-partner check
- Decided to stay with IFA.

Initial contacts for information regarding fostering continue to come from a range of marketing activities, with the website and digital marketing sources continuing to see a rise in interest and follow through to initial contact, the main sources are:

- Website
- Facebook advertisements
- Social media coverage e.g. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram
- Google searches
- IFA transfer queries
- Response to articles in community and staff newsletters
- Word of mouth e.g. foster carers, staff, friends, colleagues and neighbouring authorities
- Radio advertising
- Ebulletins
- Adverts, leaflets and posters.

From the initial contact, the Service records the prospective foster carers name, telephone number and email address to enable further contact to be made to discuss taking their enquiry further and to then complete an initial enquiry form. The majority of enquiries then lead to an initial visit with a social worker visiting them at their home. This year's conversion rate for the completed initial enquiry form to progress to an initial visit is 50.9%.

Following the initial visit, the Service will encourage suitable applicants to complete an application form to start their foster carer assessment. This year's conversion from completed initial enquiry form to completion of the application form is 24.5% which is significantly higher than the national average of 18% for Local Authorities (Fostering in England 2016 – 2017: main findings).

From this stage, a full fostering assessment will commence where their ability to foster will be reviewed in more depth. Based on the above figures the conversation rate from completion of the initial enquiry form to assessment was 24.5%, compared to 22.8% the previous financial year. The Service has continued to



provide good and consistent customer service throughout the time of an applicant's journey through application to assessment, but it is recognised that there are areas for improvement (see section seven for further information).

When the journey of completion is broken down from initial enquiry to approval, it shows that Central Bedfordshire's conversion is 13.6% which is higher than the national average of 10% (Fostering Network Benchmark Survey 2016).

The above figures could improve further as the Service progresses through the year ahead due to some enquiries being at initial visit stage or where the Service is waiting for prospective foster carers to return their application forms.

At the time of the last strategy (31<sup>st</sup> March 2017) the average journey time of a prospective foster carer to approval was 173 days, which was better than the national average of 180 days. As at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2018, the journey time remained under the national average at 176 days.

### 3) Developments and successes within the Service

The Fostering Service has had a tremendously positive and successful year. Below is a snapshot of the highlights for Service:

#### 3.1) Ofsted inspection

In June 2017 the Service was inspected by Ofsted as part of the 'Child in Need of Help and Protection, Children Looked After and Care Leavers Inspection'. Central Bedfordshire Children's Services achieved an overall outcome of 'Good' with the Fostering Service receiving some very positive feedback, particularly in relation to the recruitment, retention and training of foster carers:

'Adoption and Fostering Services are good, and effective recruitment, training and support arrangements are in place.'

'Effective foster carer recruitment, together with good support and training for carers, is leading to an increase in in house fostering households, although there is a lack of parent and child placements.'

'Foster carers receive good training to help them understand attachment theory and the impact of trauma.'

'A programme of training has been used to raise awareness of the Prevent duty, and good use is made of the train the trainer programmes to maximise impact and take up'.

#### 3.2) Fostering Network Muslim Fostering Project

In August 2017 the Service was successful in being selected as one of the four Fostering Agencies to take part in an exciting National project hosted by the UK's leading fostering charity, The Fostering Network. The project was a great opportunity for the Service to show their strengths within recruitment and training but to also identify areas for development from the outcomes of the project.



The project aimed to build a picture of the experiences of Muslim children in foster carer, prospective and approved Muslim foster carers as well as foster carers who have a different culture and religion to Muslim children they care for.

Following the project, the Service were invited to attend and present at The Muslim Fostering Project's Practice Learning Day to share their experience regarding Learning and Development for foster carers, in particular to the training around Cultural Competency and Caring for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People.

During the Practice Learning Day, the Service had the chance to network with other Local Authorities and Agencies to share practice. The Service will be receiving funding from the Fostering Network to go towards recruitment activities and further information on plans for this additional money can be found in section five of this strategy.

A report of findings for the project will be published shortly by The Fostering Network and will be available to Services nationally in June 2018.

### **3.3) PACE fostering**

The PACE (Police and Criminal Evidence Act) fostering scheme was successfully launched in April 2017. The purpose of the scheme is to support young people aged between 10 and 17 years who have been arrested to prevent them having to spend time in a police cell before they attend court the following day.

Following the launch and targeted recruitment, the Service currently has three PACE foster carers in assessment and will look to recruit further PACE foster carers throughout the year ahead.

The Service will continue to work closely with neighbouring Local Authorities to ensure an effective PACE rota is provided by PACE foster carers with further recruitment taking place where required.

### **3.4) Queen's Garden Party**

Recognition of foster carers dedication to their role and the children in their care continued to be a high priority for the Service with five fostering households being nominated for an invitation to the Queen's Garden Party. Unfortunately, two households had already attended so their applications were unable to be processed but the Service is pleased to report that the remaining three households were formally invited to attend The Queen's Garden Party in 2018.

### **3.5) Parent and child fostering scheme**

During the last strategy, the need for parent and child foster carers was highlighted, it was also an area for consideration from the recent Ofsted inspection. This year saw the development of a parent and child fostering scheme due to the increasing demand for such placements. The scheme is due to be launched in April 2018 and further information can be found in section seven.

### **3.6) Consultation with foster carers**

This year saw the Service introduce further consultation opportunities for foster carers in the form of an informal drop in with the Head of Corporate Parenting Service called 'Tea with Alex'. This has been successful and foster carers have provided positive feedback.



#### 4) Target and current need for the year ahead

The target for the year ahead is to:

- Recruit 15 career fostering households
- Implement the parent and child fostering scheme.

The focus for recruitment will be for:

- Intensive support foster carers for young people with more complex needs and behaviours. The Service will work towards recruiting and maintaining 10 intensive support fostering households
- PACE foster carers
- Parent and child foster carers
- Foster carers who can support sibling groups
- Foster carers for older children
- Foster carers for unaccompanied young people seeking asylum (UASC). Part of this will include working with our current foster carers to support them in considering UASC placements
- Respite foster carers for young people with both mainstream and intensive support foster carers.

All of the above will contribute to the aspiration to have 70% of Central Bedfordshire looked after children placed with in house foster carers.

#### 5) Recommended marketing and recruitment plan for the year ahead

From reviewing the above research there is a clear shift in the number of initial contacts requesting information regarding fostering coming from digital sources. The strategy will continue with a blended marketing approach of traditional marketing but with an increasingly larger presence online and through social media.

##### 5.1) Website

The recent developments of the webpages, alongside the increased digital marketing, led to a considerable increase in number of page views with 11,363 views between April 2017 – March 2018 compared to 7,577 the previous 12 months.

This, in turn, led to a rise in the number of initial contacts through the website. This has almost doubled from 59 in 2016 – 2017 to 104 requests for information in 2017 – 2018.

In the next 12 months the Service will continue to focus on digital marketing, including the following developments:

- The website pages will be updated to reflect the new parent and child fostering scheme and other information throughout the year as required e.g. the updated foster carers charter
- The Service will continue to work closely with the Communications team to ensure that the website's content is kept fresh, updated and engaging to continue to provide the best information to the public
- Increase use of short, targeted and specific marketing pages for advertising campaigns to encourage those interested in fostering to make an enquiry. The pages are created and made



bespoke to each advertising campaign. This improves the enquirer's journey to finding out the information they require. They are short and precise with the information regarding the particular scheme being advertised with an 'enquire now' button that asks for their name, email and telephone number. This enables the Service to have direct contact with the enquirer, provide them with information quickly and to be able to keep in touch.

### **5.2) Net Natives contract for multiple advertising campaigns**

Central Bedfordshire's contract with the digital advertising company Net Natives was renewed following a cost and quality procurement process. The contract has given the Service the opportunity to work with a company who have extensive and proven experience of successful digital marketing campaigns within adoption and fostering.

To reduce the number of external companies used, Net Natives will be running multiple campaigns for both adoption and fostering during 2017 – 2018 including the following fostering campaigns:

- Facebook advertising  
Three separate, four-week campaigns will be produced for Facebook. The adverts will run during proven successful times of the year – during and after Foster Carer Fortnight, September (which is aimed at 'empty nesters' when young people move onto university) and in January when the general public look for new opportunities.
- Radio advertising  
Radio advertising will continue on Heart radio for one four-week campaign which will be aired in May.
- Leaflet distribution  
Leaflet distribution will be completed between December and January to homes within Central Bedfordshire. The hope is to target affluent areas and larger homes where there may be more than one-bedroom spare to promote caring for siblings.
- Google Dynamic Words  
The Service will be utilising a new type of digital marketing this year, Google Dynamic Words. When someone searches terms, keywords or phrases closely related to fostering, Google uses them to generate a text advert to display to the user. This will then lead the member of the public to a marketing page and enquiry form regarding fostering for Central Bedfordshire.

### **5.3) Lamp post banners**

To raise brand awareness across Central Bedfordshire the service will be installing new large scale fostering posters in four different locations this year in the form of raised lamppost banners.

The banners will alternate between an adoption and fostering advert and will be installed in the following areas:

- High Street, Dunstable
- Lake Street, Leighton Buzzard
- West Street, Leighton Buzzard
- Town Centre, Biggleswade.



All the above locations will either have a high footfall of slow moving traffic or are located close to supermarkets, town centres or areas with a high footfall of traffic or pedestrians.

#### **5.4) Brand awareness – roundabout and bus adverts**

The Service will extend the contracts for the following for the year ahead:

- Roundabout signs  
To continue with brand awareness in a central location of Central Bedfordshire, the roundabout signs will remain in Flitwick for another year.
- Rear bus adverts  
To continue with brand awareness in the Luton and Dunstable area four - four weekly campaigns will continue for this strategy.

#### **5.5) Large scale posters at Tesco**

The large-scale posters at Tesco in Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard were installed for 2017 – 2018 with a two-year contract. The content and posters have been refreshed and updated versions will be installed in April 2018 for the last year of the contract.

#### **5.6) Fostering Ambassadors**

As word of mouth continues to be a high scoring recruitment tool, the Service will be looking to start a new scheme to find Fostering Ambassadors. Fostering Ambassadors will be existing, experienced foster carers who will support the Service with recruitment. This area will be explored further this year.

#### **5.7) Star Parties (Start Thinking About Recruitment Parties)**

Star Parties were set up by Rotherham Fostering Service as a recruitment tool as part of their recruitment strategy. The parties are proving to work well in recruitment within foster carers community groups and could be a good opportunity for Central Bedfordshire to recruit further foster carers within Central Bedfordshire.

Existing foster carers are encouraged to host a Star Party and invite a minimum of five people who they think may be interested in fostering. The parties are a relaxed atmosphere in the foster carer's home with food encouraged to help with networking and a member of the Fostering team in attendance to support.

The hope is that the parties will not only support recruitment of foster carers but will also promote future support networks if attendees of the party become foster carers. It aims to encourage community engagement and help prospective carers feel at ease in a less intimidating environment.

Costings for this scheme will need to be reviewed for Central Bedfordshire before this scheme is set up, the following is the current set up for Rotherham's Star Parties:

- Host is paid a fee of £100  
The fee is provided to cover the cost of the food and for the carer to spend as they wish. Any remaining money is theirs to keep as a fee for holding the party.
- £250 is paid to the host for any attendees who move onto approval as a foster carer
- A further £250 is paid to the host for those who then take a placement.



### 5.8) Press, newsletters and information sharing

The Service has continued to keep in touch with the local media to promote the amazing work of foster carers and share our good news and successes. The Celebration of Fostering continues to bring interest from the local media with articles and images of our foster carers being included in various publications, newspapers and through their social media channels and websites. The Service will continue to work closely with the Communications Officer to produce press releases around National campaigns and times of celebration and successes such as Foster Carer Fortnight, the celebration of fostering event, sons and daughter's week and LGBT adoption and fostering week.

Part of this work will also include the use of the following:

- Internal messaging through Staff Central (staff newsletter)
- Internal messaging through Members Information Bulletin (Councillors' newsletter)
- Regular messaging to Central Bedfordshire residents through ebulletins
- Use of foster carer testimonies and films from a diverse range of people, families and young people (where possible)
- Uploading new and engaging video clips regarding fostering to the Central Bedfordshire YouTube channel
- Nomination of foster carers and other members of the family for National awards such as The Fostering Network Excellence Awards, The Towergate Care Awards, the Queen's Garden Party and the Queen's Honours.

### 5.9) Social media

Social media continues to be a quick and free of charge way to spread good news and messaging about fostering to the general public reaching a high number of people in a short space of time.

The numbers of page likes on both the fostering and Central Bedfordshire pages have continued to rise throughout the year:

- Fostering Facebook page  
The number of page likes has risen to 504 compared to 382 in March 2017
- Central Bedfordshire Council Facebook page  
The number of page likes has risen to 10,573 compared to 8,325 in April 2017
- Twitter has also been a vital tool with Central Bedfordshire's Let's Talk Central page hitting 11,100 followers
- There is also the capacity to extend our marketing through the Central Bedfordshire Instagram page that currently has 738 followers.

The Service will continue to work closely with the Communications Officer to post and tweet messages about fostering, our celebrations and successes.

### 5.10) Councillor support

Continued Councillor support to fostering remains a high priority and the Service will work closely this year with Central Bedfordshire Councillors to seek their support in the marketing and recruitment of foster carers.



### 5.11) Admobile advertising

A new area of future advertising is admobile, a quick and non-intrusive advert shown on mobiles telephones. The Service are able to build an advert and reach a local, targeted demographic through a scrolling banner advert.

The Service will review this type of advertising this year and utilise if cost effective.

## 6) Retention and support plan for the year ahead

### 6.1) Training

Following the implementation of the training policy in 2016 the level of attendance at training has risen with foster carers increasingly meeting their core training requirements. The social workers supporting foster carers work closely with the training department to analyse each individuals' training needs and requirements to ensure training is meaningful and builds on individual's skills and knowledge to support them and the children in their care.

This year has seen the training programme financially break even for the first time. This has been achieved by multi agency working and regular advertising of the programme with neighbouring Local Authorities. This has enabled the Service to purchase specialist courses for foster carers with spaces being sold to reimburse the initial expenditure of the training. The Service has worked closely with Milton Keynes Council and Luton Borough Council who have purchased training through Central Bedfordshire Council with Bedford Borough in particular purchasing a large number of training courses for their adopters and foster carers. The Service will continue to work closely with our neighbouring Local Authorities to continue to bring in income to the Service and sharing of training resources through this year.

This year the Service will continue to provide an extensive and comprehensive training package for foster carers including face to face training, e-learning and a range of resources e.g. books, leaflets, resource packs and DVD's.

### 6.2) Celebration of Fostering

The Celebration of Fostering event continues to be a popular event in the social calendar with foster carers, staff, senior management and councillors getting together to celebrate the successes of Central Bedfordshire's foster carers and their families. This year saw fifteen foster carers/couples receive long service awards with a total of an incredible 120 years' service between them. There were also five individual awards given to carers who were nominated for going above and beyond for the children they have welcomed into their homes. The following is a snapshot of some of the feedback received about the award winners through their nominations:

*"They encompass everything that foster carers can be. They provide exemplary care for the children in their care, enjoying and embracing their individuality and the significance of their birth family"*

*"I feel privileged to have been on her journey with her, her foster placement has been superb. She has been a part of helping this young person to find her voice in the world, and shout loudly, I can do anything I want to do!"*



*“They help foster self-belief in the children and recognise this is the cornerstone for all other development. Most recently, at matching panel, the whole panel, social workers and foster carers suspended their belief as their two children confidently explained to panel why their carers were so special to them and why they wanted to be matched with them. This magical occasion was due to the respect that the carers show to the children and their birth family. We are really proud of the children, but we are also really proud of the foster carers.”*

*“He is an amazing foster brother, he takes her out and includes her with his friends that come around to our home. He is an amazing source of support to me, it’s been a very difficult year and he’s been such a valuable support to me.”*

The event will be held earlier this year to bring it closer to Foster Carer Fortnight and will return to Woburn Safari Park on a Sunday to enable families to enjoy the day together. The Service will also continue to work closely with the Communications Officer to produce as many publicity opportunities as possible following the event.

### 6.3) Support groups

Support groups continue to be well attended and to help foster carers build support networks within their local area. As they are well received they will continue to be held in Dunstable, Millbrook and Cardington with an evening social group held every quarter.

### 6.4) Consultation

A vital area of continued development is consultation and the Service will continue to consult with foster carers, looked after children and the Children in Care Council.

The foster carers talk time continues to be well attended with a number of issues successfully developed and issues resolved such as taking looked after children’s savings directly from source.

A new opportunity has also been offered to foster carers this year called ‘Tea with Alex’. This is an opportunity for foster carers to meet with the Head of Corporate Parenting Service in an informal setting as a drop-in service to discuss fostering issues.

The Service will continue to communicate with foster carers by email which means we can share information quickly at no cost and have an open dialogue with foster carers to enable them to share their views directly with the Service. The Foster Carers Newsletter is also produced and sent to foster carers every quarter.

The Service will consider different methods of communication with foster carers to encourage further communication between foster carers and the service e.g. the possibility of a WhatsApp group.

### **6.5) Foster Care Association**

The Foster Care Association is an independent voice for foster carers and provides a vital service to foster carers within Bedfordshire. The Service will continue to support the Association financially and in terms of consultation and advertising events on behalf of the Foster Care Association.

### **6.6) Mentoring**

The mentoring scheme has seen some developments this year including recruitment of a further three foster carer mentors. The Service now has six active mentors who are available to support newly approved foster carers as well as those more experienced foster carers who may need additional support.

Each mentor brings their own specialisms such as experience of long term care, experience of caring for young people with challenging behaviour as an intensive support foster carer, caring for unaccompanied young people who are seeking asylum, caring for a broad age range of children and caring for children with disabilities.

The mentor paperwork was also reviewed this year to ensure good practice, accountability and good, clear records. The mentors continue to be supervised by two members of the Fostering Service through choice of phone or face to face supervision.

### **6.7) Fostering Network membership**

Individual household membership for foster carers continues to be provided to each household and the Service will continue to be corporate members of the Fostering Network. Advice and mediation services will continue to be purchased as and when required.

### **6.8) Discounts for foster carers**

Max cards have and will continue to be provided to all foster carers once they are approved. This enables them to gain discounts to family days out and activities nationally and within Central Bedfordshire. Foster carers are also able to access KAARP benefits which enables them to access deals and discounts for various days out and services. Both will continue to be advertised regularly in the foster carers' newsletter.

### **6.9) Family and friends foster carers**

Family and friends foster carers are able to access all support groups and training as career foster carers. The Service also ensure that they receive all communications as any other foster carer.

One area for consideration this year will be the possibility of reinstating the family and friends and SGO support group. This will enable family and friends and SGO carers to build a network of peer carers who



face similar challenges. The Service will consult with family and friends and SGO carers and if viable reinstate the group at a location and time that suits those wishing to attend.

#### **6.10) CAMHS support**

CAMHS continue to support the Corporate Parenting Service and for the year ahead the following support will be provided:

- Support group  
CAMHS will be holding regular support groups for foster carers whose children have CAMH involvement.
- Attendance at Talk Time  
CAMHS will attend the Foster Carers Talk Time where possible to support foster carers with queries that may arise within the meeting.
- Office based support  
CAMHS will provide office-based support to foster carers and staff whereby they are able to book slots with CAMHS to discuss any concerns they may have.
- Complex case discussions  
CAMH will attend these meetings where CAMH support may be required.

### **7) Other areas of consideration**

#### **7.1) Parent and child fostering scheme**

The Parent and Child Fostering Scheme will be launched in April 2018. This will follow the route of a blended marketing approach with the following awareness:

- Press release
- Internal messaging to foster carers through the foster carers newsletter
- Internal messaging to staff through Staff Central
- Ebulletins to Central Bedfordshire residents
- Social media.

#### **7.2) Update of literature**

An area for improvement that will begin this year is to update the fostering literature e.g. information pack, leaflets and factsheets. Following the Foster Care in England Review (February 2018), the benefits of marketing campaigns being targeted to appeal to carers intrinsic motivations has been highlighted. Research shows that enquiries have increased where local authorities have used promotional materials that explicitly recognise fostering as altruistic, often expressed as loving children and stressing the potential to making a difference to the lives of children. This is something the Service has adopted for marketing campaigns, but it was felt some supporting literature was outdated and could be updated to take into account the above research. There is also benefit in literature and marketing materials having a more personal tone which will be considered during this exercise.

During the review it will also be a good opportunity to showcase that Central Bedfordshire is an Ofsted Good Service with the 'Good' logo being added to our existing literature.



### 7.3) Improving the customer journey through enquiry to assessment

During the Fostering Network Practice Learning Day, the Service had the opportunity to network with both Local Authorities and IFA's. During this networking some improvements to duty and the assessment process were highlighted as areas to consider for this year, such as:

- Amendment to the initial enquiry form  
It is recognised that the customer's first impressions and journey when they make an initial enquiry are vitally important to be a positive experience as there are many other Local Authorities and IFA's on our doorstep. The Service will look to amend the form and questions asked to make it more positive this year.
- Adding an evening call following an initial contact  
When members of the public enquire about fostering, the Service requests a telephone number to enable follow up calls to be made to complete the enquiry form to progress to initial visit. Calls are made during the working day with the first call being made two days following initial contact, the next the following week and the final call a week later. The Service will look to add a fourth call during the evening by the out of hours duty worker to ensure we give those who work during the week the chance to speak to a member of the Service.
- Timescales for enquiries and initial visits  
The timescales of a prospective foster carers journey from initial contact will also be reviewed to ensure that the Service is responding quickly and effectively.
- Mystery shopping  
The Service will review the possibility of completing a mystery shopping exercise at the stage of enquiry.

Another area for improvement is the way in which the Service processes initial visits with the following areas and questions to be considered:

- Are initial visits tailored to each family, their situation, their culture, beliefs etc?
- Are initial visits more positive than negative?
- How can the Service support the enquirer to overcome their fears, worries or any barriers that may have been raised during their initial visits and assessment?
- Does the Service positively challenge views to broaden them and open up their minds e.g. use of scenarios to highlight that their views of certain children, behaviours, cultures, beliefs, situations may not be what they expect and to broaden their minds to consider children of different ages, abilities and faiths?
- What does the Service do to demystify areas of concern?
- Does the Service bring up areas that they think the prospective foster carer may find a concern e.g. some prospective carers may not wish to discuss them in fear of the Service being resistant to their concerns?
- For the Service to think more about early nurturing of potential and newly approved foster carers
- Possibility of staff training regarding what a foster carer should be, their own anxieties, challenge their views and to be solution focussed.

The Service will also be looking into the possibility of experienced foster carers attending initial visits to prospective foster carers. The aim is to help prospective foster carers gain a clear picture of the reality of



fostering and to hear directly from a foster carer. The hope is that it will also help carers work through real life examples of what may worry them and how real life foster carers manage those concerns.

#### **7.4) Contact list for enquiries that have ended**

In some cases, initial contacts for information regarding fostering will be for those people who are at the early stages of their fostering journey. It is thought that some people can take months or even years to decide to foster. Central Bedfordshire has the use of Gov Delivery which enables the service to send blanket messaging to a large group of people across Central Bedfordshire by the use of ebulletins. This year the Service will collate emails for those people who have decided it is not the right time for them and add to the system. This will enable the Service to send regular ebulletins to keep fostering fresh in their mind with the hope that they will then return to Central Bedfordshire when they are ready to progress their enquiry. To ensure the Service is GDPR compliant the Service will ensure that the relevant permissions are granted at the stage they request information from the Service regarding fostering.

#### **8) Review of strategy**

As the needs of the Service change throughout this financial year the Service will regularly review and adapt the strategy and monthly working plan to meet any challenges or needs of Looked after children.

