Children’s Safeguarding & Family Support

Fostering Recruitment Strategy

2019-2021
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<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
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| **Purpose/scope** | This strategy sets out the Family Finding and Targeted Support team’s approach to recruit foster carers over the next three years.  

The Family Finding and Targeted Support Service is responsible for all foster care services including recruiting, assessing and supporting Telford and Wrekin Council’s approved carers and finding suitable, secure placements for local children to promote best outcomes. This is a critical service for some of the borough’s most vulnerable children. |
| **Subject key words** | Foster carers; placements; accommodation; looked after children; best outcomes; stability. |
| **Council Priority** | • Putting our children and young people first.  
• Protecting and supporting our vulnerable children and adults. |
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| **Finance Sign Off** | N/A |
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1. Introduction

This strategy sets out Telford & Wrekin Council’s Family Finding and Targeted Services’ Team plan to recruit foster carers over the next two years.

The Family Finding and Targeted Services’ Team is responsible for all foster care services including recruiting, assessing and supporting Telford & Wrekin’s newly approved carers and finding suitable, secure placements for local children to promote best outcomes. This is a critical service for some of the borough’s most vulnerable children.

To ensure best prospects for looked after children and their carers', the Family Finding and Targeted Support team are focused on ensuring as many looked after children as possible are placed with Telford & Wrekin approved carers in stable placements.

To be able to meet the needs of the diverse range of local children that need foster placements, it is imperative we recruit new local foster carers from in and around Telford & Wrekin. This includes not just long and short term foster carers but also those who can provide support in the form of short break, respite, fostering plus and mother and baby placements.

2. Aims and objectives

The key aims and objectives of this strategy are follows:

- To improve local placement choice and stability for children and young people in Telford & Wrekin Council, particularly for children over ten years old, step down to foster care placements and short break care;
- To increase the number of in-house placements and reduce the usage of independent fostering agencies and residential care.

This will be achieved if we can recruit more in-house foster carers to our network who can help meet the needs of looked after children in Telford & Wrekin.

Our target is to recruit at 12 additional foster carers annually. This number will include the recruitment of two foster carers to our Foster Care Plus programme in line with supported transitions of planned step down placements for children and young people from residential care to long-term fostering.
3. Looked After Children/Needs Analysis

The number of looked after children in Telford and Wrekin at the end of 2017/18 was lower than at the end of 2016/17, at 370 compared to 379.

Nationally, the number of children becoming looked after is increasing; it has increased steadily over the last nine years. At 31st March 2017 there were 72,670 children looked after, an increase of 3% on 2016. The ‘Care Crisis Review’\(^1\) for England and Wales was prompted as a result of the national picture, with the number of care order applications reaching a record level in 2017 and the number of looked after children at its highest since the Children Act 1989.

In Telford & Wrekin too there has been an increase in recent years but with a more varied year on year picture, notably a ‘spike’ in 2016/17. However, within the regional data pack it is evident that Telford and Wrekin are one of the only local authorities in the West Midlands to have reduced the rate of looked after children per 10,000 since this time:

However, the growing proportion of specialist looked after children (LAC) placements is emerging as a key concern. The number of children requiring residential placements has increased in proportion with the overall rise in looked after children from 308 (2013/14) to 370 (2017/18). The overall expenditure on residential placements has increased considerably, as more placements fall into a higher cost bracket - due to both the level of complexity and the placements market. Residential placements are notably the most expensive type of placement - costing an average £3,271 per week, compared to £833 for external fostering, and £362 for in-house fostering.

A potential explanation for the ongoing placement of looked after children in residential provision, despite the service wide acknowledgement of this type of placement being a significant cost pressure, is the increase in complex mental health and behavioural needs of looked after children in Telford and Wrekin, requiring the use of more expensive specialist placement options, with the inevitable knock-on impact on placement budgets.

The below table details the number of looked after children in each age band for the last four years:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of Child</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1 year</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>1-4 years</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9 years</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>78</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-15 years</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16+ years</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>43</td>
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To understand this further, we have interrogated all new periods of care by age of child at period of care start. Below the data has been split into percentages for each age bracket year on year. This demonstrates an increase in the number of young people aged between 10 and 15 becoming looked after in Telford and Wrekin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of Child at PoC Start</th>
<th>2015 (%)</th>
<th>2016 (%)</th>
<th>2017 (%)</th>
<th>2018 (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1 year</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>1-4 years</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>5-9 years</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>10-15 years</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16+ years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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It is also important to establish whether the change in the age of children and young people entering new periods of care has impacted on the initial placement types:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Placement Type</th>
<th>2015 (%)</th>
<th>2016 (%)</th>
<th>2017 (%)</th>
<th>2018 (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placed with own Parents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Living</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Foster Care</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Foster Care - Internal</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Foster Care - External</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other / Not Know</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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The above data shows that the number of placements in residential provision has increased, along with the increase in the number of teenagers becoming looked after. It is also clear that there is a downward trend in terms of the number of children and young people being placed in internal foster care as their initial placement.

Our primary focus must therefore be to increase initial placements with internal foster carers and attract more in-house foster carers for children and young people aged between 10 and 15.

This is not to say we will not recruit foster carers for younger children as the data also demonstrates ongoing need in this area and the number of children under one year old has also had a significant increase. It is also understood that given adequate time, support and training, those carers may extend their offering to help older children in the future.
The below outlines the ethnicity of Telford and Wrekin’s looked after children:

This broadly reflects the breakdown of ethnicity in the borough in line with the 2011 census.
4. Foster carer cohort

As of October 2018, the current number of Telford and Wrekin mainstream fostering households is 86. This is made up of 155 individual carers. The type of fostering that the carers offer differ and we have short term, long term, shared care, contract care, respite, Children with Disabilities carers and Fostering Plus carers.

97% of our current carers are White British. This is slightly higher than the average of 89% (population aged 25-64) as recorded in the 2011 census. Consideration should therefore be given to targeting black and ethnic minorities (BME) in marketing activity, ensuring they are presented in marketing materials and perhaps planning activity is areas such as the Wrekin locality which has a higher than average number of BME residents compared to the rest of the borough.

5. Enquiries

Between April 2016 and March 2017, 202 enquiries were received. Of these enquiries, approximately 38 progressed to initial visits, after which a number were discounted for being unsuitable and others withdrew of their own choosing resulting in 8 approvals as of March 2017. Between April 2017 and March 2018, 182 enquiries were received and 23 progressed to initial visits which resulted in 13 approvals. Since April 2018 to October 2018 there have been 63 enquiries, which resulted in 30 initial visits and currently there are 10 households in assessment and 8 households booked on to the next skills to foster training.

Over the last five years, spikes in enquiry levels were seen in September, October and January with dips in the level of enquiries during school holiday periods, April, August and December. The most common routes to enquiry being google search, direct enquiries and Facebook.

The Fostering Network estimates that on average one out of ten enquiries progress to approval as foster carers. To meet our target of recruiting 12 new fostering households per year, we must therefore aim for at least 120 enquiries per year.

To ensure the conversion rate is as good as possible we must also ensure:

- Enquirers are welcomed positively, provided with a personal service and responded to quickly.
- Prospective carers are given clear, engaging information that highlights what Telford and Wrekin Fostering can offer at every touch point with a consistent message.
• The application process is smooth and efficient with fostering carers approved with 26 weeks where possible

6. Research

There is research that is useful to consider in our local recruitment and marketing of foster carers. The recently published Foster Care in England: Review (2018) by Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers and the subsequent Fostering Better Outcomes, DFE follow up report explored a number of areas, including attitudes, motivations and barriers to fostering recruitment and retention.

Foster Care in England found that:

LAs rarely have the luxury of choice in placements, particularly in emergencies, meaning that children are placed out of necessity rather than matched with a family and according to their needs. One of the factors driving this… is a lack of understanding of where there are gaps and where recruitment therefore needs to be targeted, as well as variable consistency and quality of vacancy management information.

Foster Care in England report stated:

More needs to be done to understand the number and needs of children in care (the demand) and the number of carers and their ability to care for different sorts of children (the supply) and the interplay between the two.

In Telford and Wrekin, we are committed to helping children and young people and their families to achieve the outcomes that matter to them in life. We want to see them living healthy, happy, more independent and fulfilling lives. Through consultation with children/young people and their families, we know that receiving the right help at the right time with the right solutions that will match their needs will achieve better outcomes for them.

As a local authority, we fully support the Foster Care in England recommendation that:

“…much greater regional cooperation could concentrate marketing expertise, and make better use of recruitment budgets and we urge LAs to consider combining their recruitment efforts.” Hence, Staffordshire County Council, Shropshire Council, Stoke on Trent City Council and Telford & Wrekin Council are facilitating a collaborative working arrangement, through the establishment of the North Midlands Regional Adoption &
Permanency Partnership, in order to promote improved outcomes for vulnerable children across our region.

The Fostering Operational Delivery Group sits within this partnership and will lead specific development in relation to Fostering and develop a collaborative approach across the regions Fostering Services. The membership of this group will continue to include Fostering Service Managers and Fostering Operational Managers. The membership of this group will act as champions for specific areas of practice including recruitment, matching, placement support and early placement.

National research demonstrates that the way recruitment currently works can be confusing for prospective foster parents and both reports raised concerns about the information received by prospective foster parents, and the quality of handling of initial enquiries. Telford and Wrekin's Fostering Service has clear expectations and timescales to ensure a consistent and effective response to initial inquiries as well as a new tracking system to remain in contact with and support prospective foster parents as they move through the application process.

Some other key findings from national research include:

1) One in five adults may have some interest in fostering or adopting in the future
2) Many myths need dispelling – people are quick to rule themselves out for many reasons including age, being single, being a smoker or overweight
3) Messaging must be simple and clear to understand what kind of applicants we are looking for, how the application process works, what support is available and what kind of children need fostering
4) Communication must also illustrate the benefits to the individual as well as society

It also revealed characteristics of people who are predisposed to fostering. These include people who are:

- Involved in altruistic activities (e.g. have done voluntary work, are active in their local community).
- Have previous experience of fostering or adoption (i.e. have adopted a child or know someone who has, were fostered as a child etc.)
- Actively practice a religion
- Work in higher managerial, intermediate managerial, skilled manual work (particularly those who currently work for a not-for-profit organisation and/or in healthcare) as well as carers.
Another piece of research by the Fostering Network, “Why Carers Care” 2015 revealed that 81% of recently approved foster carers share similar values. These were people classified as “Pioneers”. Pioneers have a strong desire for fairness, a keen sense of what is right or wrong and are concerned about society. They are self-assured, have a high level of self-efficacy and will be the first to respond to what they see as a moral call to action. To engage and influence Pioneers it is therefore imperative to involve them and provide space for questions and discussion, so they may fully determine themselves whether something is ‘right’ or ‘fair’.

Children and young people come into care at various points within their childhood. The age profile of fostered children in the care of Telford and Wrekin shows:

- 7 per cent aged 0-1 year.
- 20 per cent aged 1 to 4 years.
- 21 per cent aged 5 to 9 years.
- 41 per cent aged 10 to 15 years.
- 11 per cent Aged 16 +.

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With a significant majority of older children and young people in foster care (52% over the age of 10), and a positive struggle to find prospective foster carers able and willing to care for older children in Telford and Wrekin, greater understanding of the existing workforce is ongoing to help target similar individuals for these children.

The benchmark also collected data on the age profile of foster carers in Telford and Wrekin, finding:

- Two per cent are aged 18 to 29 years.
- 14 per cent are aged 30 to 39 years.
- 26 per cent are aged 40 to 49 years.
- 41 per cent are aged 50 to 59 years.
- 16 per cent are aged 60 to 69 years.
- One per cent are aged 70 years and over.
This data will be used as the basis to drill down further locally to see if there are any correlations in the ages of foster carers who foster older children, their professional experience, their values and other relevant parameters. This insight will help services structure recruitment campaigns to attract more people with the potential to meet local foster care needs.

The figures suggest that 40-59 is the most common age to become a foster carer and that people aged 30-54 should be our primary target demographic for recruiting new carers with the average length of service for foster carers in Telford and Wrekin being 7.2 years.
There may however there may be scope to increase the number of people fostering between the ages of 55-64 given the aging population and when seeking carers for older teenagers as it is often people who have parented teenagers who are more confident in their ability to help this age group.

7. Review of past marketing activity

7.1 Marketing and publicity undertaken

While limited marketing activity is currently taking place due to the absence of a marketing officer in the new staffing structure, the team are showing signs of success with more potential households awaiting assessment than at this point last year.

In addition to monthly information events, some activities that have been taking place in the past included:
- Weekly social media posts and a number of paid sponsored Facebook posts
- Posters distributed locally
- Print advertisements in local media (magazines and school folders)
- Press release sent out to local media
- Radio Advertisement

A £250 referral scheme for existing foster carers is available, but we are looking to relaunch with an increased reward of £500 for any referrals that results in the recruitment of a new foster carer.

We will not be re-branding, as there is already a strong visual brand that exists for Telford and Wrekin fostering. However, we will be updating and refreshing existing materials, ensuring a more personal tone to our marketing content and communication with the public ensuring that there is a presence in our materials of Black and Ethnic Minority people.
A full website review is underway including competitor analysis and all website content is in the process of being re-written to make it more clear, concise and engaging. In addition, a new recruitment pack is being produced for the same purpose, highlighting the benefits to the individual as well as the child, and outlining the process in simple terms. Both methods will clearly outline the offer to foster carers for Telford and Wrekin including support and benefits.

There is some difficulty tracking results of all activity as much of the publicity is designed to raise awareness in the local community about fostering. Also from speaking to those that enquire, it is clear that fostering is something that people often think about for a number of months or years before they contact us and it is difficult for them to remember where they heard about Telford and Wrekin fostering initially. Therefore, it is important that there is recurrent and visible communication within the local area, so that when individuals do decide to enquire about fostering, they will be familiar with the Telford and Wrekin fostering brand.

Measurement and tracking for all channels of marketing will need to be improved if we intend to utilise the intelligence based on the most appropriate mechanisms for targeting our intended audience. On enquiry, the question will be asked to where the enquirer first heard about Telford and Wrekin fostering, what made them enquire with us and we can ask if they have seen specific material. This will help us to collect more qualitative data which will influence future advertisement.

8. Future approach

To achieve our recruitment target and thus meet our aims and objectives our approach will be to adopt a multi-faceted marketing approach utilising various channels to reach our key audience(s). This will include some partnership working where possible with local businesses, community groups as well as schools and colleges, promoting the Council as a Fostering Friendly organisation and encouraging others to become Fostering Friendly employers. We will utilise our existing foster carers as advocates in our marketing and publicity.

The focus of this will be to:

- Ensure the Telford Fostering brand is visible in and around Telford and Wrekin
- Raise our online presence through social media and digital media
- Raise awareness of the need for more foster carers as well as to educate people on the role of foster carers, what they can achieve, who can foster and the differing types of fostering.
- Convert more people thinking about fostering by engaging with these people (either
face to face, on the phone or via the website) and communicating the strengths of Telford and Wrekin Council

- Attract people with work experience of managing complex behaviours and transferring these skills to fostering.

Marketing activity will be targeted towards people aged 35-55 living within 20 miles of Telford and Wrekin. We will be fully inclusive based on a person’s sexual orientation, ethnicity or gender. We will uphold the fostering brand identity and focus on key messages with strong calls to action. Following intelligence gathered it suggests that the north region of the borough there is a high population of females aged 35 to 55 years old with a spare bedroom; therefore, we will target this area in regards to advertisement.

Once people have enquired, we will ensure that we discuss all types of fostering with them to ensure that they can make an informed choice to what type of fostering they would be interested in. In regards to approvals, we will make the approvals as open as possible to ensure that we can receive the maximum sufficiency out of approved carers. There is a demand for all types of foster carers whom can care for all ages. The types of foster carers required are:

- Emergency Carers
- Respite Carers
- Shared carers
- Fostering Plus carers
- Children with Disabilities
- Short Term Foster carers
- Long Term Foster carers
- Parent and Child

The full plan for next year’s activity and how it will be measured will be set out in an annual marketing plan.

9. The recruitment process

The initial stages of our recruitment process have been reviewed and modified to ensure that prospective carers are progressed through the process in a timely fashion and approved ideally within 26 weeks of their enquiry.

When people contact us via telephone, our aim is to speak to them immediately so telephone enquiries are being taken by anyone who is available within the team. In addition online/email enquiries are being responded to by members of the team within one
working day. If the enquirer wants an information pack, we will send the pack via email where possible so there is not a delay in people receiving information.

If there is a positive screening following the details being taken from the enquirer, an initial visit will be offered within five working days to ensure that whilst their interest in fostering is high we are capitalising on this therefore minimising the chances of them enquiring with any other agencies. This is due to the research that suggests that people interested in fostering will usually apply with the first agency that responds and completes an initial visit.

During the initial visit, the social worker will provide the enquirer with the benefits of fostering for Telford and Wrekin, including, support, training and finances. They will also collate further information and consider the facilities that they have to offer. The social worker can make the decision at the point of the initial visit to offer the enquirers an application form in order to avoid delay. If the social worker is unsure about the enquirer at this point, they will request a meeting with the manager to discuss their concerns. Following this meeting, the enquirers will be made aware of the outcome within five working days.

Successful initial visits are followed up immediately with an invitation to the next skills to foster preparation training. If applications are not received within ten working days, follow up calls will be made to the enquirer to offer any further advice or support about the application.

Previously there have been delays in progressing enquirers to the Skills to Foster preparation training due to the availability of the sessions. Therefore, to overcome this and to offer more regular training we have a joint partnership agreement with Shropshire Fostering team that enquirers can be booked on their training to ensure there is a training event available on a monthly basis.

The service’s needs analysis identified a need for more foster carers able to care for Children aged between 10 and 15. As various reports have acknowledged, fostering services are struggling to recruit foster carers for these children. The service therefore will also be exploring ways of upskilling existing foster carers to meet demand.

Objectives:

- Increase the number of foster carers to look after children aged 10-15.
- Develop skills of existing carers to assist them to continue to look after older children and teenagers.
- Develop skills of carers of other age groups to encourage them to increase age range
to include teenagers.

- Increase awareness of current workforce of need to recruit more carers for older children and teenagers.

The service has agreed the need to provide bespoke training packages for existing foster carers to broaden their placement potential. In addition to this, the support offered to foster carers has increased and examples of the support available are:

- Out of Hours advice line
- Fostering support workers (12)
- LAC CAMHS support and advice groups
- Foster carer Consultations
- Foster carer Participation groups
- Specific Support Groups
- Access to a therapist
- Dedicated training facilitator
- Annual foster Carers conference

The main challenge the service is facing is in respect of the negative perceptions of teenagers. In a recent survey, some foster carers identified as potentially able to expand their placement range to care for teenagers expressed an unwillingness to enter into discussions or attend training to support development in this area. The service is however, committed to continuing to support carers of teenagers with ongoing relevant and targeted training. Lessons learned from this drive will inform marketing strategies to recruit new carers for older young people and teenagers.

Telford and Wrekin Fostering are also focusing on growing ‘word of mouth’ recruitment and using carers to positively promote fostering in Telford and Wrekin. Foster Carers are selected on their ability to positively promote fostering. They needed to be confident in speaking to others and have the skills to be able to source and organise events they could attend.

Fostering ambassadors organise and attend numerous events in local communities, attend information sessions and carry out recruitment activities online such as posting on the service’s social media accounts to raise local awareness of fostering.

10. Summary

In summary, it is of upmost importance that we recruit more foster carers to foster in-house with Telford and Wrekin Council. Over the last two years, the number of looked
after children has been increasing, as has their age. We will focus on recruiting foster carers of all ethnicities and particularly those that could foster older children and teenagers or offer short breaks however, we will not exclude people willing to foster younger children or offer respite as we have needs across the board.

The aim is to attract at least 120 enquiries a year to meet our recruitment target and ensure that people enquiring are responded to promptly and given a personal service that conveys the strengths of Telford and Wrekin’s fostering service.

Research gives an interesting insight into the types of people who foster and who are predisposed to fostering. This will guide our approach and targeting.

Some success has been recorded from marketing activity to date. Our future marketing approach will build on this success and use measurement and review to drive improvements and efficiencies. We will focus on raising awareness of fostering and who is eligible to foster, as well as converting more of those actively considering fostering through a strong brand identity and key messages tailored to our audience.

Processes have been put in place to help ensure as many people as possible who are interested and suitable for fostering are approved within 26 weeks of the initial contact.

We will be reporting on the number of hits to the website, analysis on where people have seen advertisements about Telford fostering, analytics from digital advertising on a monthly basis which will support us to manage and change how we are advertising. Retention of foster carers will be evaluated every 6 months, using information from exit interviews. (These are to be continued to be undertaken for all carers that leave the service) Post approval interviews will be completed 6 months after approval, to learn from and review the recruitment process and initially support provided.

The approach that we are taking is that we will segment the target audience that we approach to ensure that we are actively recruiting carers for all the identified types of fostering and not excluding the general, mainstream foster carers.

There will be an increased branding across Telford coupled with a strong online presence including google and social media.