

DUNDEE CITY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Social Work Committee – 15 January 2007

REPORT ON: Review of Fostering Service

REPORT BY: Director of Social Work

REPORT NO: 30 - 2007

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 This report informs members of the progress of the Fostering Service during the past 12 months, including the business of the Foster Panel.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Social Work Committee: -

2.1 Note and approve the contents of the report.

2.2 Instruct the Director of Social Work to provide an annual report on Kinship Care Services.

2.3 Instruct the Director of Social Work to provide a further report on the rise in numbers of looked after and accommodated children and the implications of this for the fostering and adoption services.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1 Any financial costs involved will be met from within the existing Social Work budget.

4.0 SUSTAINABILITY POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 This report does not directly impact on the Council's Sustainability Policy.

5.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The work undertaken by the Fostering Service recognises and values diversity and promotes the principle of equal opportunities. Foster carers and Panel members are drawn from diverse cultural, religious and ethnic background reflecting the needs of looked after and accommodated children.

6.0 MAIN TEXT

6.1 During the past year Dundee City Council Social Work Department has continued to fulfil its duties as a fostering service as laid down in the Fostering of Children (Scotland) Regulations 1996 and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. This involves recruitment and assessment of foster carers and support to carers and children within their placements.

6.2 On 1st April 2004 Dundee registered as a fostering service with the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care. During October - December 2006 the Commission undertook their first inspection in Dundee against the National Care Standards for Foster Care & Family Placement Services. The focus of their inspection on this occasion was recruitment and assessment of fostering applicants and the work of the Fostering Panel. The written inspection report is likely to be published in early 2007.

6.3 **Children and Young People**

6.3.1 Foster care is now established as one of the main ways of looking after children and young people separated from their birth families and who are in public care. It is a positive option alongside other forms of care. Children who are in foster care present with a wide variety of needs and demands and may remain in foster care for only a short period or for many months or years. Undoubtedly, the ranges of needs and challenges that children in foster care present has become significantly more complex over recent years and the tasks that foster carers are called on to undertake have increased accordingly.

6.3.2 Over the past 5 years there has been a 38% rise in the numbers of children and young people becoming looked after in Dundee. During the period January 2006 to September 2006 there have been 92 new admissions with 61 of these, including all under 12 year olds, being located within fostering placements. There have been only 27 discharges from foster care in the same period. All indications from both local and national indicators are that this overall increase in numbers is likely to be a long-term trend.

6.3.3 The majority of children who are unable to be looked after by their parents, including an increasing number of babies and very young children, are from backgrounds of severe neglect, parental drug or alcohol abuse and long-term parental mental health issues. The chaotic family lifestyles and inadequate parenting that these children and young people have experienced means that many are presenting with substantial behavioural, health and developmental difficulties or are at high risk of developing such difficulties at some point during their childhood. Many will require additional supports within their educational settings and a number will require specialist input from health, including mental health.

6.3.4 A series of reports, entitled Extraordinary Lives, commissioned by the Social Work Inspection Agency and published in September 2006, provides detailed information about the experiences of children and young people looked after away from home as well as recommendations aimed at improving outcomes for this growing population. Future Committee reports on the Fostering Service will provide more detailed information and analysis on the experiences of children and young people who are looked after in public care in Dundee as well as highlighting the impact on foster carers and service providers of these increased demands.

6.4 **Recruitment**

6.4.1 Throughout the past year, recruitment of foster carers has continued to have a high profile in Dundee to try to keep pace with the demand for placements. The recruitment group, comprising of family placement social work staff and foster carers and adopters, have developed a number of strategies including increased liaison with local media and creative use of local advertising opportunities. The STV television campaigns for fostering and adoption have been particularly successful in raising awareness of adoption and fostering issues and inviting interest from potential applicants.

6.4.2 In spite of these measures, the substantial increase in the number of children and young people requiring accommodation has put considerable pressure on the family placement service with many foster carers providing care to more children than their substantive approval allows. In addition, over the past few months, there has necessarily been a rise in the use of voluntary and independent fostering agencies to make up the shortfall in placement beds. The financial impact of sustaining these arrangements in the longer-term is untenable within current funding.

6.4.3 The picture in Dundee of increased demand and a shortfall in capacity is mirrored, to varying degrees, across all the local authorities in Scotland. The Scottish Executive has acknowledged the need to improve fostering services and to this end has provided a limited amount of additional short-term funding. Committee Report 378 - 2005 detailed how Dundee proposed to utilise these monies.

6.5 Kinship Care

6.5.1 The profile of kinship care has been raised over the past decade due to the rising demand for substitute family placements and the corresponding shortfall in foster placements alongside research evidence highlighting poor outcomes for children in public care.

6.5.2 A report by Aldgate & McIntosh, entitled Looking After the Family, published as part of the Extraordinary Lives series, is critical of the muddle of arrangements for assessing and supporting kinship care placements throughout Scotland. There are a number of key recommendations that have been submitted to the Scottish Executive and will likely be considered in the consultation exercise currently underway on the National Foster Care and Kinship Care Strategy.

6.5.3 Dundee has a long history of supporting children to be cared for within their extended family or friend networks. This is reflected in provisions under the link carer and residence allowance schemes. There are currently 49 approved link carers receiving allowances for 69 children, 60 carers receiving residence allowances for 86 children and 7 carers receiving custody allowances for 7 children.

6.5.4 Proposals are currently being developed aimed at increasing support to kinship care arrangements that recognise the family system's own networks whilst providing the same safeguards as for other Looked After children.

6.6 Foster Panel

6.6.1 Committee Report 602-2005 noted the proposals, subsequently agreed by Committee, for reviewing and restructuring the Foster Panel. The restructuring along with the recruitment and training of new Panel members was successfully undertaken during the first six months of 2006.

6.6.2 Fostering, Medical & Legal Advisers, agency employees and members who are independent of the local authority, including a number of adoptive parents and former foster carers. This has increased the breadth of knowledge and experience available to inform the Panel in its deliberations. Further recruitment is planned for 2007, hopefully to include representatives from the voluntary sector and an elected member.

6.6.3 The Panel continues to fulfil its statutory duties:

- To consider all prospective foster carers and recommend whether they should be approved as carers.
- What categories of child the approval should be for, for example age range, gender and if for a specific child.

Dundee City Council Fostering Panel also undertakes a number of supplementary functions including:

- Giving advice on specific issues during the assessment process.
- Considering amendments to approval of carers.
- 6 monthly reviews of ACE carers.
- Bi-annual reviews of all foster carers (to be implemented in January 2007).
- 6 weekly reviews of emergency extensions to approval.
- Applications from relatives or friends for approval as Link Carers.
- Applications for Residence Allowances.

6.6.4 Panel Statistics

Between January 2006 - December 2006 the Panel considered the following:

• Foster carer applications	15
• Amendments and extensions to approval	30
• ACE carer reviews	6
• Advice Panels	2
• De-registration of foster carers	3
• Link carer applications	27
• Residence allowance applications	5

In spite of the pressures arising from placement numbers, Dundee's foster carers and Social Work staff are to be commended for the positive way in which they have responded to the changing requirements of the service and the complex needs of the children requiring placements.

7.0 CONSULTATION

- 7.1 The Chief Executive, the Depute Chief Executive (Support Services) and the Depute Chief Executive (Finance) have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

8.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 8.1 None.

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Director of Social Work

Date: 8 January 2007