

DUNDEE CITY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: SOCIAL WORK & HEALTH COMMITTEE - 25 JUNE 2007

REPORT ON: FOSTERING AND ADOPTION RESOURCES

REPORT BY: DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL WORK

REPORT NO: 324- 2007

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To inform members of the pressures being experienced by the family placement service.
- 1.2 To inform of the impact of this on the experiences for looked after and accommodated children.
- 1.3 To make recommendations regarding the future development of the family placement service.
- 1.4 To recommend policies for promoting good practice and positive experiences for children & young people even within a context of pressurized resources.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended the Social Work Committee agree:-

- 2.1 That the fostering and adoption services need to continue to recruit and retain additional carers to meet the increased demands on the service.
- 2.2 That the fostering service needs to continue to improve the conditions of service, including financial payments, in order to meet recruitment and retention targets.
- 2.3 That the capacity of the fostering and adoption services will need to be enhanced in order to meet the additional demands.
- 2.4 To implement the recommended policies in relation to the maximum numbers of looked after children in a fostering household and looked after children sharing bedrooms.
- 2.5 That the service continues to build capacity and support kinship carer placements.
- 2.6 To instruct the Director of Social Work to provide a report on the adoption services review.
- 2.7 To instruct the Director of Social Work to continue to lobby the Scottish Executive regarding the under funding of local authority fostering and adoption services.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 In light of placement numbers and budgetary pressures there is a projected shortfall in funding of the fostering and adoption services. The shortfall for the financial year 2006/07 was £303,000 and given the escalating numbers of children requiring placement, the shortfall for this financial year will likely be similar to or even exceed this amount. This will be met from within the overall Social Work Department's Revenue Budget 2007/08.
- 3.2 Core services will continue to be provided within existing budgets but recommendations 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 can only be progressed when additional funding becomes available.

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 Fostering and Adoption Services recognise and value diversity and promote the principals of equal opportunities. Carers and adopters are drawn from diverse cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds reflecting the needs of looked after and accommodated children.

6.0 MAIN TEXT

6.1 Profile of looked after children

As highlighted in previous reports 107-2005 & 29-2007 the number of looked after children in Scotland has increased significantly over the past decade. This national trend has been mirrored locally with a 45% increase in numbers of looked after children in Dundee during the period December 2001 - December 2006, and a 9% increase in the last 12 months alone. All indications from both local and national indicators are that this overall increase in numbers is likely to be a long-term trend.

- 6.2 UK research notes that outcomes for children in public care are poorer than the general population across a range of areas including educational attainment, over-representation in the adult prison population, homelessness and the use of mental health services. There is also a higher likelihood that as adults, these children will go on to be unable to care for their own children who may also require public care.
- 6.3 There has been a corresponding increase in the numbers of children requiring permanent substitute care away from their birth parents. Over the past year in Dundee an average 85% of all looked after and accommodated children under the age of 12 years have been actively considered for permanence or are already in a permanent placement.
- 6.4 In Dundee approximately 30% of all looked after children are living with foster carers. A further 30% are living with relatives on a long-term or permanent basis, 10% are in residential care and the remaining 30% live with their parents at home with support from Social Work Department.
- 6.5 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 significant parental drug or alcohol abuse and long-term parental mental health issues. These children have been subjected to such neglect and abuse that many of them are already experiencing health, developmental and behavioural difficulties or are at high risk of developing such

difficulties at some point during their childhood. In order to meet the complex needs of these children substantial additional supports from across a range of services, particularly education and health are required.

- 6.6 The impact of substance misuse has been considerable. It is often very challenging to set achievable tasks for parents to evidence they have successfully addressed their addiction problem within timescales that meet the needs of their children. Children cannot wait indefinitely for things to improve at home although many linger in temporary foster placements longer than necessary as repeated attempts at rehabilitation are attempted.
- 6.7 Profile of carer provision in Dundee
- The Cost of Foster Care, a comprehensive study undertaken by the Fostering Network & BAAF published in 2005 estimated that there was a shortage of 10,000 foster carers across the UK and 700+ in Scotland at that time. Their most recent survey, published in 2007, indicates that this has risen to a shortfall of 1,700 fostering households in Scotland alone due to the increase in numbers of looked after children over the intervening period.
- 6.8 This study indicates there are a number of factors that contribute to placement breakdown and ultimately to poorer outcomes for children and young people: multiple moves of placement, inadequate matching of a child's needs with the placement offered and placements made at a distance that necessitate a move of school or present difficulties in maintaining contact between the child and his or her family and social networks.
- 6.9 The Fostering Network recommends a 15% vacancy rate in order to provide placement choice. Most local authorities, including Dundee, have failed to recruit and retain sufficient number to permit a vacancy rate.
- 6.10 Recruitment of foster carers and prospective adopters continues to have a high priority in Dundee. Report 107-2005 Review of the Fostering Strategy 2001, noted the ageing population of foster carers within Dundee, as elsewhere, and the need to recruit to replace those who would retire over the coming few years. A short-term funding stream from the Scottish Executive to improve fostering services in Scotland, has contributed to a high profile media campaign and to the Family Placement Service recruiting 14 new foster carers in 2006. Foster carer allowances have also been increased to 75% of The Fostering Network recommended rate to aid the retention of carers. This has meant that for the time being Dundee has been able to increase capacity of the fostering service rather than just recruit to replace.
- 6.11 Nonetheless, there remains a significant shortfall in provision of foster care placements within Dundee. Foster carers are regularly asked to take children out with their substantive approval age or number. At the present time, there are 8 foster placements over numbers and 14 children and young people awaiting placements (although not all of these will be for foster placements).
- 6.12 Family Placement Service has traditionally purchased a limited number of placements from external providers. These are generally long-term, specialist placements for children with particular complex needs. Over recent years there has been a need to purchase additional external placements due to the demands of increased numbers of accommodated children and the shortfall of in-house provision. By and large these are not difficult to place children who require specialist provision. These external placements are a very expensive option, not just financially but in terms of the impact on children being placed far from home and worker time in supporting the placements. External foster placement costs rose by 25% in 2006/07 to over £400,000, an overspend of £84,000.

- 6.13 Dundee has a long tradition of supporting kinship carer placements, placement of children with friends or relatives as a direct alternative to them being accommodated. Over the past 5 years the numbers of children in such placements has grown by more than 30% and now stands at 173 children placed in 131 households. There has been a corresponding rise in expenditure to support these placements from £329,716 in 2004 to £560,209 in 2006.

6.14 Implications of the pressures on the Family Placement Service

There are growing numbers of children and young people requiring a foster placement. For some no immediate or appropriate placement is available. This can then result in them either joining a waiting list or being accommodated temporarily in short-term placements waiting for a placement that better meets their assessed needs. This inevitably involves at least one additional move for a child and increases the risks of poor outcomes and future placement disruption.

6.15 As part of the strategy to try to resolve the placement shortfall issues the Family Placement Service has purchased placements from the Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) to a greater extent than previously. These are significantly more expensive than providing placements in-house.

6.16 The Fostering Service in Dundee is struggling to keep up within an increasingly competitive market. The IFA's are able to provide better financial rewards and better conditions of service. Carers for the IFA's are generally paid at least The Fostering Network minimum recommended allowance in addition to enhanced fee rates. The ratio of worker to carers is generally far higher in the IFA's than in most local authority fostering services. Many of the IFA's are providing in-house therapeutic and educational support to placements, dedicated Out of Hours support to carers and quicker assessments of applications. IFA's are also unlikely to put pressure on their carers to accept placements above approval numbers or age range. Not surprisingly the IFA's are not reporting the same difficulties with recruitment and retention of carers as most local authorities across Scotland.

It is known that two IFA's are opening offices in Tayside this year, which will only increase the pressure on Dundee in terms of recruiting and retaining carers, and indeed staff.

6.17 Local authorities themselves are responding in a variety of ways to try to the pressures to recruit and retain foster carers. 13 of the 32 local authorities in Scotland are now paying The Fostering Network recommended allowance rate or above. Many other authorities have increased their fee payments so that the income available to the fostering household is considerably enhanced. There is currently not a great deal of movement of carers between neighbouring local authorities partly because local authorities usually have geographical restrictions on taking up applications.

6.18 National and local research studies undertaken with fostering households indicate that issues such as overcrowding, over numbers placements and carer and child support resources are key factors in carers becoming dissatisfied with the fostering role.

6.19 The increased numbers of children requiring permanent substitute care is also placing heavy demands on the adoption service. In June 2004 there were 57 children under the age of 12 years requiring permanent substitute care away from birth parents or extended family. This figure had risen to 97 by June 2006. Workers are unable to progress assessments of prospective adopters at a rate which keeps pace with the number of children waiting for such placements. This has led to a greater number of placements being purchased from the voluntary sector as well as an increase in resource sharing within the local authorities that are part of the North-East and West of Scotland Consortia.

6.20 Kinship carer placements often provide a positive alternative to children and young people needing to become looked after. However, the Department's success in exploring these alternatives means that the numbers of such placements greatly exceed the numbers currently budgeted for. The total budget for kinship carer placements in 2006/07 was £475,147. The actual spend was £560,209.

6.21 Policy on maximum numbers of looked after children per fostering household

Notwithstanding the difficulties previously highlighted it is essential that we continue to provide high standards of care for looked after and accommodated children. These standards should not be compromised simply because of the pressure on placement numbers.

Scotland is currently the only country in the UK that does not impose a limit of three looked after children within a fostering household at any one time. The Scottish Executive recently consulted on this issue in respect of the National Fostering & Kinship Care Strategy. Strong support for adopting a maximum numbers policy was received from, amongst others, The Fostering Network and British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering who argue that overcrowding puts excessive pressure on fostering families and contributes to the breakdown of placements. Furthermore, we would argue that multiple placement households are generally unable to provide a child with the consistency and stability that we would wish for children in our care.

We therefore recommend that Dundee introduce a policy of a maximum of 4 fostered children per fostering household. Exceptions could be made to accommodate larger sibling groups where it is assessed to be important that they remain together or where the fostered children are all matched with the carers as permanent placements.

6.22 Policy on looked after children sharing bedrooms

Dundee Family Placement Service currently has no specific policy in relation to sharing bedroom accommodation within a fostering household. The current situation permits fostered children or young people of any age sharing bedrooms either with other fostered children or with the foster carers own children.

It is acknowledged that the current practice does not explicitly take account of the needs of older children in relation to privacy or personal space. The need for some private time is often a primary consideration for older children and young people. Similarly, having somewhere of their own to entertain friends, perhaps even allowing sleepovers, becomes increasingly important.

It is suggested that issues around lack of space and privacy can be a source of much conflict within a fostering household and may well be a contributory factor in placements which become difficult to sustain or which ultimately break down. Whilst there is no quantitative evidence currently available to support this assertion there is a body of national and local anecdotal evidence, including from the sons and daughters of Dundee foster carers and from looked after young people themselves.

The proposal is therefore, that all looked after children in foster placements aged 10 years and over should have a bedroom of their own. Siblings of the same gender who have expressed a wish to share may do so but should still have a room of their own available to them. This policy would apply to new applicants only in the first instance. The policy would only come into force with existing carers when current placements move on.

7.0 **CONSULTATION**

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

8.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

Committee Report 107-2005 Review of Foster Care Strategy
Committee Report 378 - 2005 Scottish Executive Funding to Improve Fostering Services
Committee Report - 29-2007 Review of Adoption Service
Committee Report 30-2007 Review of Fostering Service
The Cost of Foster Care, 2005

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