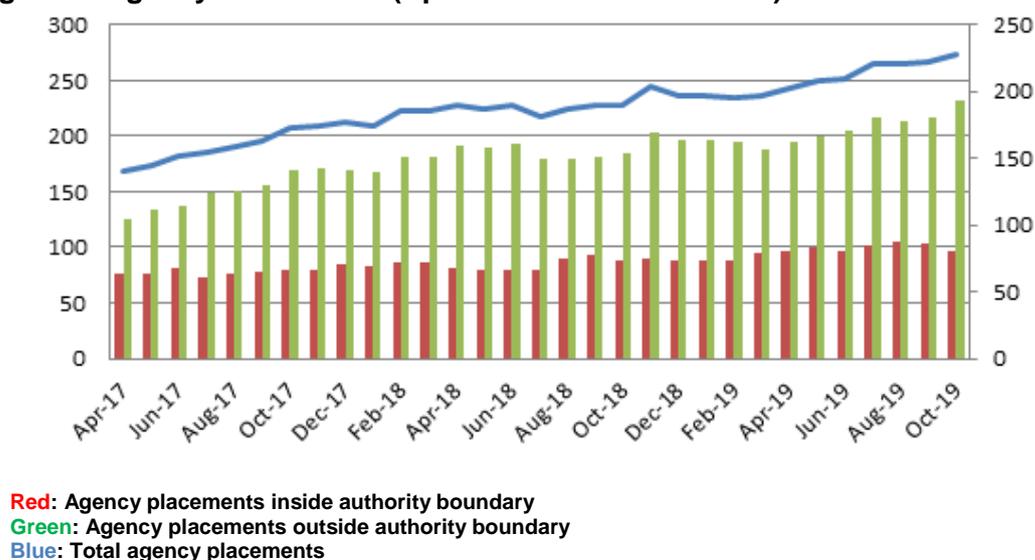


## Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

### 1. BACKGROUND

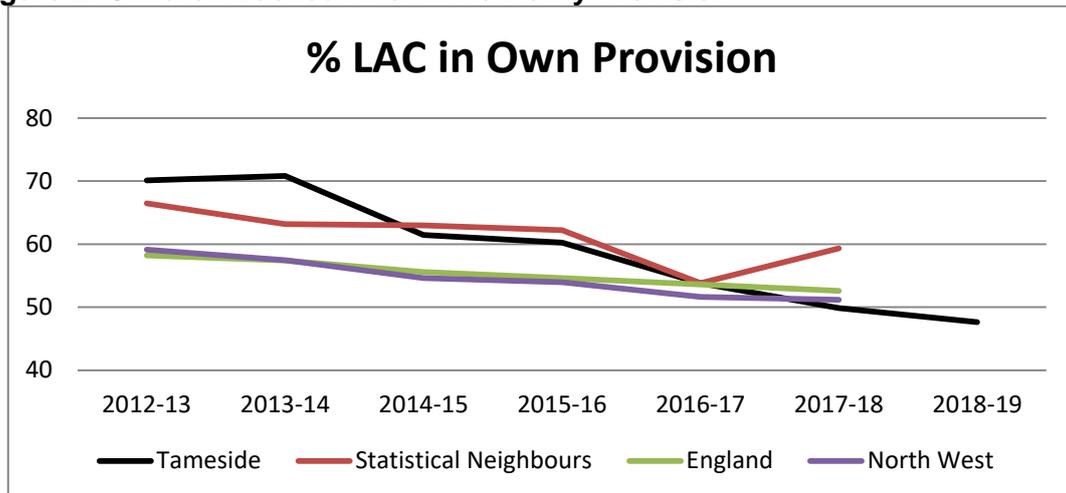
- 1.1 The national picture shows a shortage of high quality foster carers, which is also reflected at a regional and local level. Based on growth in the number of children looked after, it is estimated that Tameside requires 20 to 30 additional foster carers in the short to medium term. Notwithstanding the growth in numbers, it remains important that the authority works to actively increase the range of placement options to best meet the needs of children. Methods of recruitment can be challenging when taking account of the options available to attract and retain foster carers in a competitive market.
- 1.2 Fostering placement rates in Tameside are significantly below that of comparison authorities. While the actual number of placements has risen during the last two years, the growth in numbers of children looked after has outpaced this. Almost two thirds of children looked after are fostered, with only 15% of placements classified as long-term.
- 1.3 Figure 1 below shows an increase in the number of children in agency placements both inside and outside of the authority area. Data for the year ending October 2019 shows a 20% increase in the total number of children in agency placements. This growth is attributed predominantly to placements made outside of the borough.

**Figure 1: Agency Placements (April 2017 to October 2019)**



- 1.4 With significant increases in the number of children looked after, it is important that the Council actively seeks to grow the number of foster carers. Figure 2 below shows less than half of placements are now made to authority provision. The data does include residential placements, however the majority is made up by fostering.

**Figure 2: Children Looked After in Authority Provision**



- 1.5 The improvement journey for Tameside Children's Services started in 2016, following the result of an Ofsted inspection whereby local services were judged to be 'Inadequate'. Services have been redesigned to improve practice standards, effectiveness of delivery and future sustainability. This has affected all areas across Children's Services including fostering.
- 1.6 Ofsted completed a full re-inspection in May 2019, with Children's Services receiving a judgement of 'Requires improvement to be good'. Examples of improved practice and management oversight were included within the final report, which also acknowledges efforts made by the Council in the period since 2016. The number of Tameside children becoming looked after has risen over time, with a need to continually review the capacity and success of services to meet the needs of young people over time.

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 Councillor Bill Fairfoull, Deputy Executive Leader (Children and Families); and Richard Hancock, Director of Children's Services, attended the Integrated Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Panel meeting on 25 July 2019, to provide an overview of fostering services in Tameside. A working group was established to review current arrangements for the recruitment and retention of foster carers in Tameside, with a view to support improvement work of the Executive.
- 2.2 A local offer should be clear and visible to both existing and prospective foster carers. In a competitive market the Council needs to have a clear package of benefits, training and support in place. A commitment is also required from senior leaders to ensure sufficient resource is allocated for the purpose of foster carer recruitment and retention, to deliver improved outcomes for young people and which also contributes to the long-term financial sustainability of Children's Services.
- 2.3 Members met with the Council's Fostering Service on 9 September 2019 and have also attended a foster carer support group meeting held in Stalybridge on 12 November 2019. Approximately 20 foster carers were present at the support group which has proved useful to ensure the views and experiences of carers have been captured.

### 3. KEY FINDINGS

#### Demand on services

- 3.1 At the start of September 2019 Tameside had a total of 710 children looked after. This is a number that has risen consistently over a period of 3 years. When compared to a similar period in 2016, the authority has experienced an overall increase of 63% in the number of children looked after.
- 3.2 The increase in demand on services has been significant, which generates a direct impact on the ability of fostering services to find the most suitable placements to meet the needs of all children. While a rise in agency placements can be considered reasonable during such a period of demand, the service has been unable to achieve the required levels of recruitment in order to grow the total number of carers to achieve an appropriate level.
- 3.3 The Fostering Service provided data from September 2019 to show that there were a total of 309 council approved foster carers, this was made up of:
- 207 community / mainstream carers (external / members of the public)
  - 102 connected carers carers (family and friends)
- 3.4 Data from a year end fostering return (March 2019) showed that from the 356 places made available, a total of 297 placements were made. This is a number made up of both community and connected carers. The table below shows a breakdown of placements, vacancies and unavailable places. The data appears to show an underutilisation of existing placements, with a total of 53 places either unavailable or vacant. Places not available can range from a short-term hold due to a carer being unavailable or on holiday, through to the service awaiting outcome from investigation before placements can resume.

**Table 1: Placement use at 31 March 2019**

Number of children	Vacant places	Places not available	Short break care
297	17	36	6

#### Tameside Fostering Service

- 3.5 The Fostering Service is responsible for all activity associated with the recruitment and retention of foster carers, which includes the development and delivery of a strategic vision for local services. Over recent years the service has faced significant pressures associated with compliance, team expansion and working to achieve greater permanence and consistency of management and staff.
- 3.6 In January 2019 a review of the service was undertaken by an independent fostering specialist. The review highlighted positives and a number of challenges, with a key element being the need to improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers.
- 3.7 Targeted improvement work and collaboration is required in order for the Fostering Service to develop a comprehensive local offer for foster carers. A report was presented to Executive Cabinet on 27 November 2019, which provides detail on sustainability projects for children looked after. Proposals outline a range of activities aimed to effectively manage and monitor the future sustainability of services.
- 3.8 Associated projects include an improvement plan for fostering and a review of existing placements, with a focus on outcomes and suitability. Additional investment will seek to increase the number of carers through the development of a new model. There is also an ambition to increase the number of specialist carers and to review aspects related to the payment structure and provision of ongoing support.
- 3.9 When meeting with the Fostering Service a number of issues were presented on a historic lack of consistency and collective oversight. This has resulted in communications, recruitment, training and support not being fully coordinated or connected. This has made it

increasingly difficult to deliver the desired levels of training, support and benefits to foster carers.

- 3.10 It was also reported that while a recruitment and retention post was created within the Fostering Service, this is currently vacant. The service has been able to take forward a number of learning points to determine the suitability and required resources in order for the role to have the desired impact.

#### **Learning from other authorities**

- 3.11 It has been important to consider the approach taken by other local authorities in relation to the recruitment and retention of foster carers. The research has primarily focused on the areas where Children's Services have been rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted and examples of good practice at a regional level. While this provides only a snapshot into the public insight around fostering, this has proved useful when seeking assurances on the importance of developing a local offer and package for Tameside carers.
- 3.12 **North Lincolnshire Council** was rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted in June 2016. The council's website provides detailed information on role requirements and expectations, anecdotal feedback from current foster carers and the offer of additional benefits.
- 3.13 There is an immediate sense that efforts have been taken to ensure messages are clear and consistent, which are further supported by a package of benefits. An example of this is the Max Card which offers a range of discounts and free entry at venues for all foster families. A scheme has also been established which provides interest free loans to foster carers who need to buy a bigger vehicle in order to accommodate the whole family, including foster children.
- 3.14 **Leeds City Council** was rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted in October 2018. On review, the emotional support provided to foster carers holds a strong position. There is clear advice on the support available from local groups, access to the voluntary and community sector and with up to 14 days paid annual leave for foster carers.
- 3.15 A number of additional benefits are offered which include free membership at leisure centres for foster carers and children aged 8 to 18. This is further complemented by free junior swimming lessons, discounts to local businesses and access to a free counselling service.
- 3.16 At a regional level the **Wigan Deal** encompasses a wide range of services delivered by and with the Council. The 'Deal for Fostering' offers extensive training opportunities as well as round the clock support, advice and mentoring. Additional benefits include the Max Card, vouchers to acknowledge long serving carers ranging from £250 to £1000. There is discounted leisure membership for families, which includes free entry for all foster children. A referral fee is made available to existing carers, as well as a transfer bonus for IFA carers.
- 3.17 Further support is on offer such as round the clock advice, a regular foster carer newsletter aimed at keeping everyone informed of service developments. Certain aspects have been tailored to match the support available to council employees such as general counselling in the event of illness, bereavement and flood advice.

#### **Feedback from foster carers**

- 3.18 Foster carers undertake an important and vital role, with often an unwavering level of commitment to improve outcomes for children and young people in Tameside. Feedback from existing carers has shown a remarkable dedication and commitment to the role, with the ambition to improve services for the better. It is important that mechanisms are in place to ensure the views and experiences of carers are captured to inform future service delivery.
- 3.19 The foster carer support group held on 12 November was well attended with approximately 20 carers present. The discussions focused on improvements, with key points summarised

below.

- All carers were committed and positive about their roles
- Some frustrations around communication from social workers / response times
- There can be delays in information being shared with foster carers / don't feel they are in the loop / once a child is placed the support and contact often reduces, possible system failures?
- Some carers not receiving consistent support from services leading to placement breakdown – often dependent on allocated social worker
- Responsiveness of service to prevent crisis
- A need to feel more valued / opportunities to be listened to / integral part of the Council / part of the informal workforce for Children's Services
- More transparency required around decision making for placements
- Inconsistent and unclear approach to payment structure and how skill levels are applied
- Emergency placements – reviewed and communicated at frequent intervals
- E-learning possibly not effective or practical for all foster carers – range of training offered
- Foster carer handbook requires a refresh/update – could this be electronic?
- Create roles of foster carer representatives – opportunities for consultation, engagement, governance and decision making
- Wider offer and benefits package for Tameside foster carers
- Specialist foster carers - development opportunity to upskill existing carers
- Possible need to create a clear and branded offer for fostering in Tameside – recruitment campaigns
- Harness and utilise existing skills of carers – advice and mentoring

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

- 4.1 Tameside Children's Services have faced significant improvement pressures over recent years.
- 4.2 The authority has experienced consistent growth in the numbers of children looked after, with notable increases in the number of agency placements made outside of the borough.
- 4.3 There is a growing need to increase the number of foster carers and to develop an effective mix of placements to support children with more complex needs.
- 4.4 The Fostering Service currently has no available resource or capacity to plan and deliver recruitment projects.
- 4.5 Learning opportunities are available from authorities rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted, with a need to develop a local offer for foster carers.
- 4.6 Targeted improvement work will focus on the future sustainability of services, the stability of placements and provide additional investment.
- 4.7 Capturing the views and experiences of foster carers can be used to inform and test future improvement proposals.

#### **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 5.1 That immediate attention is placed on increasing the number and range of foster placements available in Tameside.
- 5.2 That future action is taken to raise the profile of fostering and to gain greater understanding of the local barriers to fostering.

- 5.3 That services look to develop a programme of listening and engagement activity which includes role requirements, what to expect from the Council, training, development plans, remuneration and reward.
- 5.4 To review options and potential advantages of introducing a mentoring scheme for fostering and to actively seek foster carer representatives to work more closely with the service.
- 5.5 That the Council creates a clear and consistent offer for Tameside foster carers, with learning available from other authorities to support the development of a new benefits package for foster children and families.
- 5.6 That options are explored to establish an adequately resourced foster carer recruitment function, with a dedicated role that can be responsive to future demand.
- 5.7 That the Executive involves Scrutiny in future development stages and consultation aimed to improve service delivery and outcomes.