

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 16 March 2017

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, People

PORTFOLIO: Children, Young People & Families

SUBJECT: Shared Fostering Service

WARDS: All

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek approval from Executive Board Members to develop a proposal for a shared fostering service for Warrington, Halton, Cheshire West and Chester and Cheshire East, which would include the approval of a single local authority to deliver the functions of a fostering service on behalf of the partnership.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS: That Executive Board approves

- 1) that the proposal for a shared fostering service should be developed between Warrington, Halton, Cheshire West and Chester and Cheshire East;**
- 2) that one of the partner local authorities will be the single local authority acting as the provider of the shared service;**
- 3) that further decisions regarding the development and establishment of the shared fostering services are delegated to the Strategic Director, People in consultation with the Lead Member for Children, Young People and Families Services; and**
- 4) that authority to sign off an inter authority agreement is delegated to the Strategic Director, People.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 Over recent years there has been an unprecedented national rise in the numbers of children coming into care which has resulted in local authority fostering services being unable to meet the demand for foster placements. Increasingly there has been a reliance on independent fostering agencies (IFAs) to provide placements resulting in significant financial pressures for councils. IFA placements cost on average £700 - £800 per week, more than double the cost of an internal placement.

- 3.2 In Halton, the capacity of our in-house fostering service is severely stretched, with a reduction of fostering households from 85 households in 2015/16 to 69 fostering households, with only 3 families in assessment currently. Halton has a high number of initial enquiries but low conversion of these enquires to assessment, and the capacity of a small service on its own to follow up these enquires may be having an impact on conversion rates.
- 3.3 The cost of IFA placements across the four partner local authorities in the first half of 2016-17 totalled **£6,411,838**. In Halton, the current projection is **£1,649,445** for IFA placements an increase on previous years.
- 3.4 IFAs are usually large organisations focusing solely on the recruitment of mainstream foster carers. In comparison local authorities have relatively small fostering services with competing priorities with fostering teams not only recruiting and supporting mainstream foster carers but also assess and support kinship/connected carers (family and friends carers). The latter assessments are usually required as part of the court process and have tight timescales for completion and take up a lot of time. They divert the service's limited resources from mainstream recruitment and assessment. In Halton, the fostering service also undertakes placement finding for children in care At a time of high demand for placements this process takes longer and is done by the same small staff cohort.
- 3.5 Currently the four partner local authorities are aiming recruitment campaigns at the same population in the sub-region with competing messages. Operating as a single entity each local authority is not only competing with their neighbouring local authorities but also with a strong IFA market. It is therefore not surprising that, to a large extent, the local authorities have lost the market to the IFAs. A shared fostering service would allow resources to be used more effectively and efficiently through economies of scale and the pooling of budgets. As demonstrated by the shared adoption service (WWiSH) a shared service can result in much improved recruitment processes, an increase in the number of applicants who are assessed and approved without undue delay.
- 3.6 The common services and processes within fostering services are a 'good fit' for a shared service:

Recruitment	Currently four local authorities are individually advertising for foster carers across the patch and effectively are trying to attract from within the same pool. The creation of a common brand and a single campaign would present a stronger, more effective approach. Shared resources will improve the quality and targeting of recruitment and will reduce the reliance on IFA placements.
Assessment	Assessment is a common process. All four councils follow the Skills to Foster Framework. A shared

	service would enable more frequent introductory training across the services footprint and support the faster recruitment of foster carers.
Panel Process	This is a common process – a shared approach would result in efficiencies and a more effective approval process with speedier decisions.
Family and Friends Assessment	There is commonality in approaches to Family and Friends assessments and the development of a single model of assessment would result in a more efficient process.
Placements	A shared service would increase capacity across the patch. Sharing resources across neighbouring authorities will allow children to remain closer to their community and enable children to remain at their existing schools.

4.0 AIMS, OBJECTIVES AND BENEFITS OF THE SHARED FOSTERING SERVICE

4.1 The key aims of the shared fostering service are to achieve:

- a more effective service through improved recruitment, assessment and training of prospective carers;
- improved outcomes for children through greater placement choice and the increased availability of placements that can meet their needs; and
- a more efficient service.

4.2 The shared fostering service will be developed with a focus on providing sufficient foster placements to meet the needs of the four local authority partners. The key objectives are:

- to provide a sufficient range and number of foster carers able to parent children with a wide range of profiles and needs, enabling more children to be placed “in house”;
- to develop and support carers to enable the placement of sibling groups and older children;
- to reduce the reliance on IFA placements
- to retain mainstream carers through the provision of high quality support and training.

4.3 A shared service has the potential to deliver the following benefits:

- a service with a clear focus and resource to recruit more foster carers that meet the needs of the children;
- local placement children;
- improved safeguarding of children as they will be placed in local authority placements where robust monitoring and oversight;
- improved retention of foster cares supported by a comprehensive training programme and a common foster carer allowance and benefits scheme; and

- reduced reliance on IFA placements and reduction in spend.

5.0 PROJECT GOVERNANCE

5.1 In order to ensure effective governance of the shared fostering service a project board has been established consisting of the assistant directors of each local authority.

- Fiona Waddington Warrington Borough Council
- Tracey Coffey Halton Borough Council
- Emma Taylor Cheshire West and Chester Council
- Nigel Moorhouse Cheshire East

5.2 Project Board members will be supported in their work by the respective Heads of Service/Service Managers who have responsibility for fostering services and project management support is being provided by Warrington Borough Council and Cheshire West and Chester councils.

5.3 A steering group has also been established consisting of the Heads of Service/ Service Managers and the Fostering Team Managers. The steering group's work is focused on identifying commonalities in process and practice; developing a proposed structure and operational model.

6.0 PROPOSAL

6.1 The proposal is for a shared fostering service to be developed between Warrington, Halton and Cheshire West and Chester and Cheshire East. The four partner local authorities have a strong history of collaborative working in respect of children's services: a shared youth offending service and three of the local authorities are partnering in the establishment of a regional adoption agency.

6.2 It is proposed that one of the four local authorities will become the lead provider authority for the shared service. The other three local authorities will undertake the governance and quality assurance role through a Partnership Board. The service would be underwritten by an inter-authority agreement based on a business case/service specification. No lead LA has been identified.

6.3 Fostering services undertaken by the new partnership service are:

- Recruitment, assessment and training; and
- Supervising and supporting foster carers

6.4 It is proposed that the development of the service is phased. Phase 1 will be the development of the recruitment, assessment and training arm of the service with the aim of going live in October 2017. Phase 2, the supervision and support arm involves significant planning in terms of a full service operating model, and will be developed concurrently with Phase 1 but will go live in April 2018.

- 6.5 Should the proposal be approved a communications and stakeholder consultation plan will be produced and implemented. Key stakeholders are staff, foster carers, panel chairs and children and young people and unions. A full staff consultation will be undertaken for each Phase of the development.

7.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

7.1 Children & Young People in Halton

It is critical for children and young people to be placed locally so that they can maintain their education, relationships and contact with friends and family and have regular access and support from their social worker and support services.

7.2 Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton

Stability in placement is key for children and young people to succeed in education and be supported when leaving care in accessing the appropriate career options.

7.3 A Healthy Halton

Children in care may have needs with their emotional health and wellbeing as a result of their life experiences which is why stable and sufficient capacity within the foster service is necessary for good matches and stability.

7.4 A Safer Halton

It is essential to monitor the quality of care that children receive and to respond if there are concerns.

7.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None.

8.0 FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1 Financial modelling of the shared service will be undertaken once the proposed structure is finalised. The major savings that are to be made through the establishment of a shared service is through the reduction of spend on IFA placements as more foster carers are recruited and the stock of internal placements increases.

- 8.2 As a shared service it will be necessary to have a common fostering allowance payment and benefits scheme. It is envisaged at this stage that when a foster carer is approved the financial payment will be made by the local authority in which the foster carer resides. If four separate payment schemes were to remain this could impact on recruitment as there would be a lack of parity and fairness between carers with some

carers being paid more or less than others. A new aligned payment structure will be developed and consulted on in Phase 1.

9.0 RISK ASSESSMENT

9.1 The key risks are detailed in the table below:

Risk	Level	Mitigation
Withdrawal of local authority commitment or lack of agreement as to lead authority	Low	There is a history of collaboration between the four local authorities and there is no reason to indicate that any would withdraw or be unable to agree re lead authority
Legal – Local authorities must deliver a fostering service	Low	Local authorities will still be delivering a service by commissioning the lead authority to deliver the service on their behalf.
Financial – continued reliance on IFAs due to inability to recruit.	Low	Local authorities will not be competing; a strong brand will improve recruitment alongside a business -like approach to recruitment to enhance our position in the market.
Regulatory concerns/Ofsted	Low	<p>The Partnership Board will monitor the performance and quality assure the service provided by the lead authority, including meeting statutory requirements and the national minimum fostering standards.</p> <p>Ofsted currently do not have a framework for inspected shared services and hence until this occurs the service will be inspected 4 times. However with the statutory requirement for local authorities to be part of a Regional Adoption Agency Ofsted will most likely be tasked with developing an inspection framework for a</p>

Risk	Level	Mitigation
		shared service.
Governance	Low	The Partnership Board will offer robust governance and performance manage and quality assure the service being provided.
Lack of equity of Foster Carer usage	medium	In Phase 1 the distribution and usage of the foster carers will need to be developed and signed off by each local authority
Reputation	Low	The government is keen for local authorities to enter into different delivery models in order to improve outcomes for children. This development will be seen as innovative practice.

10.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY / EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

10.1 The benefits of a shared fostering service to vulnerable children needing a foster placement are outlined in section 4. By increasing the area from which foster carers will be recruited from will allow the service to meet the diverse needs of this group of children and ensure that their welfare is safeguarded. A full equality impact assessment will be produced prior to formal consultation with staff.

11.0 CONSULTATION

11.1 As detailed in paragraph 6.5 consultations with a range of stakeholders will be undertaken should the proposal be agreed. A formal consultation with staff will be undertaken once the service delivery model has been formally agreed by the four local authorities.

12.0 REASON(S) FOR DECISION

12.1 In order Halton Borough Council to meet its statutory duty to provide sufficient foster placements for children who are coming into or who are in care it is necessary for a new model/approach to be delivered. Currently demand outstrips provision and there is a heavy reliance on costly IFA placements which is placing a financial pressure on the council.

12.2 A shared fostering service is a model that offers economies of scale that should lead to a more operationally efficient and cost effective service.

13.0 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

- 13.1 Halton can continue as it is but there is not the capacity to undertake the level of marketing, recruitment and assessment required to meet the demand for foster carers. Over the short-term additional resource will be required to bolster our local recruitment but at the moment the lack of capacity of staff and poor market supply is having an impact on the services ability to match children appropriately to the far fewer number of foster carers and providing the right level of support to our current foster carers this is increasing the risk of placement breakdown and the consequent higher costs with increased use of IFAs and residential provision. The matching of children with foster carers was an area to improve highlighted by the Ofsted Inspection in 2014.

14.0 IMPLEMENTATION DATE

- 14.1 October 2017.

15.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None.