



Together for Children Fostering Recruitment Strategy 2017-19

Recruitment initiatives to increase the numbers of foster carers for Together for Children, Sunderland - Fostering

together for
children
SUNDERLAND

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Introduction

Together for Children, Sunderland – Fostering became operational as an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) on 1 April 2017.

The key priority for the new agency is to recruit more foster carers who have the right qualities and competencies to meet the changing needs of the children we look after in Sunderland.

“In Sunderland we want to provide sufficient high quality placements for children and young people in our care and for care leavers which enables them to achieve their potential. We are committed to delivering excellence in our approach with the intention that the outcome for every child in care and those leaving care are at least as good as their peers who are not in care” (Sufficiency Strategy July 16 – July 18)

This strategy provides a profile of Together for Children’s (TFC) current carers, considers local issues impacting on recruitment of new carers and sets out our approach to recruitment of foster carers over the next 3 years.

The strategy should be read in conjunction with Together for Children’s Sufficiency Strategy, July 2016-18

Aims and Objectives

The key aims and objectives of this strategy are as follows:

1. Provide an effective, high quality fostering service that meets the changing needs and numbers of the looked after population
2. To increase the number and skills of ‘in house’ placements and therefore reduce the number of children placed within IFAs in order to reduce the cost to TFC for the provision of care for Looked After Children
3. To increase the number of foster carers in respect of:
 1. older children and teenagers
 2. complex children and young people
 3. large sibling groups
 4. younger carers who will provide longer term stability for younger children coming into care.
4. To insure that all people who are interested in becoming foster carers are welcomed without prejudice, responded to promptly and given clear information about recruitment, assessment, approval and support.

National Context

The DFE have recently published a research report on 'The Fostering System in England: Evidence Review (July 2017)'¹

Findings of the review:

- According to data collected by DFE over the years the overall population of looked after children has risen by 5% since 2012
- There has been a shift in the profile of children coming into care with a declining number aged less than 5 years which may reflect the escalating number of Special Guardianship Orders many of which are being used for younger children who are placed with family and connected people.
- Children entering care do so with ever more complex difficulties including serious physical and mental health problems and developmental problems.
- Local Authorities have faced increasing problems recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of foster carers, particularly for those who required specialist placements. As a result there has been a significant use of and growth in independent Fostering Agencies.
- Local Authorities are struggling under pressure to improve outcomes for children in the face of budgetary cuts.

In January 2016 the Fostering Network reported that there was a national shortage of 9,000 foster carers. The demand for foster carers outstripped supply and it was recognised that independent fostering agencies were 5 times more successful at recruiting than local authorities.

Sunderland Context

Sunderland has experienced all of the challenges described above in the national picture. The numbers of Looked After Children has risen steadily; those coming into care have more complex needs, we have seen a drop in the numbers of 'in house' foster carers, and have found it much more difficult to recruit new carers. The number of connected carer assessments has increased year on year.

The numbers of children placed in IFAs has decreased since March 17, however is an increase from March 15 figures.

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https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/629383/The_fostering_system_in_England_Evidence_review.pdf

We have seen a significant increase in the numbers of older young people coming into the care system. However, the most obvious area of need in Sunderland is securing placements for adolescents and for large sibling groups.

Sunderland Looked After Children Data

Current data is based on every foster carer being approved for 3 children regardless of true capacity. This is legacy practice and was to provide greater flexibility should an exemption be required to accommodate a child; however it is recognised that this is poor practice and gives a false impression of the real number of vacancies at a particular time as many of the foster carers approved are unable to accommodate 3 children.

To address this issue, all historically approved foster carers, are having their approval status corrected at their annual review. This will ensure that all new foster carer approvals going forward reflect their true approval status.

As of 31/8/17 TFC Sunderland Fostering has 191 mainstream foster carers who look after 236 children.

		TFC	Connected carers	Short breaks	Staying put	IFA
Number of carers		191	27			
Number of children		236		16	19	73
Age of carers	20-30	0	7%			
	31-40	13%	14%			
	41-50	20%	26%	13%		
	51+	67%	53%	82%		
Age of children	Under 1		Currently under development			
	1-5					
	6-10					
	11-15					
	15+					
Location	Sunderland					
	North East					
	Other					
Ethnicity						

The majority of TFC's foster carers live within Sunderland with a small number living on the outskirts of the city or within the wider regional area. Most are within close travelling distance of Sunderland, many are approved as connected persons for a specific named child or young person.

Recruitment Activity

78 carers were approved between the period 1.7.17 – 1.7.17, 17 were mainstream foster carers and 61 were connected carers.

The Fostering Service has had a significant growth in the assessment of family / friend (connected) carers the majority of which are de-registered as the family members secure a legal order from the Court e.g. Special Guardianship Order or a Child Arrangement Orders.

As a rule Independent Fostering Agencies do not undertake Regulation 24 assessments or support connected carers.

In the same period 1.7.16- 1.7.17, 65 carers were deregistered; the main reason for de registration was connected carers being granted a legal order such as a Special Guardianship order or Child arrangement Order (60%) , 15% for change of circumstances and 9% retired and 3% due to standards of care

Number of foster carers recruited 1.07.16 - 1.07.17		Number of foster carers de registered 1.07.16 -1.7.17	
78		65	
Annual net gain		13	

Comparative costs for Sunderland Foster Carers and Independent Fostering carers cost.

Age	Local Authority Weekly cost	Based on the 7 Framework	Difference
0-4	£204.49	£680.00	£475.51
5-10	£223.20	£700.00	£476.80
11-15	£260.72	£730.00	£469.28
16+	£296.70	£736.00	£439.30

Source Sufficiency Strategy

Date	Number of IFA placements
March 2015	69
March 2016	72
March 2017	78
July 2017	72
August 2017	73 = 31% of all placements

These costs are based on mainstream Foster Carers age related allowances plus a Level B Foster Carer Fee.

In recognition that Sunderland has a shortage of foster placements across the board it is planned that review of the Foster Payment Framework is undertaken, in recognition that as an IFA, TFC's foster care payments are below the national average and that if we do not offer parity we are at risk of losing foster carers to neighbouring Local Authorities and neighbouring Independent Fostering Agencies. It is also needed to ensure we give a comparable offer of support to foster carers as part of our recruitment campaign. A working group is currently developing the proposal.

Performance information and data as we move forward

A performance score card is being developed that will can be generated from Liquidlogic, this will be in place post implementation 1st February 2018. This will include a profile of the demographics of carers, placement activity, vacancies and recruitment status. This will be critical to ensure that the new service is operating effectively and efficiently.

Priorities

1. Payment Framework

There is a requirement for Together for Children Fostering Sunderland to revise the current payment framework to bring the payments to foster carers in line with the regional rates.

Some work was completed in early 2017 which compared the foster carer payment rates with near neighbours and an outline payment framework was drafted. This framework needs to be reviewed, taking into account the financial impact a rise in fees will have for current carers and the timescales for recruitment of new carers to start to show budgetary savings.

The draft framework will be used as a starting point, to consult with current carers, fostering officers and officers in finance to arrive at a fair and competitive payment framework that will be attractive to new carers and incentivise current carers to stay with the TFC fostering.

This will be considered by the TFC board and the city council.

2. Marketing

Most recent experience

Towards the end of 2016 CREO Strategic Solutions were approached to assist with the Foster Carer recruitment campaign. The CREO campaign had minimal impact on recruitment.

Between January and June 2017 we have held 7 fostering information evenings, we had an initial expression of interest from 5 couples and 2 single individuals. None of these proceeded to an assessment. Information gained after enquiry as to why people did not proceed with their application included:

- Concerns about fee structure / payments.
- Part A packs sent out. None returned.
- One couple proceeded to the Stage 1 Agreement Meeting but decided not to continue. No specific reason given.

Sunderland is a member of the North East 7 Regional Consortium who has a frame work in place for commissioning placements from Independent Fostering Agencies.

Change in approach

We intend to revise our approach in the marketing of foster carer recruitment campaign. Rather than one short-term but large-scale marketing campaign, utilised in December 2016, we intend to run a longer-term, phased campaign. The campaign will use a variety of marketing methods running in phases rather than in parallel.

A consultation event is being set up to take place at the end of September with current foster carers, this is to take on board their experiences and to generate ideas as to how best we increase the number of foster carers, taking into account that word of mouth is a powerful recruitment tool.

Using a phased approach, spreading our resources over a longer time period creates an on-going presence and a consistent local profile as opposed to one short 'burst' of activity.

A phased approach also allows us to evaluate our success on an on-going basis and refine our approach accordingly, focusing future investment on the areas that bring most returns.

We will reuse CREO creative from the late 2016 campaign as this was well liked, approved by Corporate parenting Board and Change Council, still looks fresh and is cost effective to reuse (cost approx. £200 to update all existing creative).

Ahead of recruitment campaign, TFC will create key messaging to run through all activity in our on-going foster carer recruitment campaign. This messaging will focus on the key motivations / drivers identified in the DFE's "The fostering system in England: review" (p 70), including financial reimbursement and the ongoing training and support offered by TFC – both key factors in recruiting and retaining foster carers. We will use the newly established TFC website, Twitter and press releases, also through the internal newsletter that goes to all staff promoting the concept of becoming a foster carer.

Messaging will also:

- Highlight that we are particularly looking for carers for older children, children with complex needs and sibling groups, but would like to hear from anyone with an interest in fostering.
- Recognise and answer potential anxieties around becoming a foster carer.
- Set out the desired qualities and practical criteria (to minimise unsuitable applications).
- Make clear the support offered to carers during and post recruitment

Phase one overview:

- Social media advertising. Social media marketing is acknowledged to have a 'growing importance' in recruiting foster carers in the DFE's report 'The fostering system in England: review', published July 2017. Social media is cost-effective and allows for targeting a very specific demographic in terms of age, location and interests. £1,000 for 4 week campaign.
- Lightweight advertising on local transport at key travel hotspots in Sunderland and the wider region. Bus and Metro advertising has a high 'dwell time'. Transport campaign on bus / metro network. 4 x week campaign including bus: 22 x bus rears. Sunderland and Washington depots - Total £2,957 plus VAT. Metro: 80 x carriage cards approximately 1 in every other carriage, posters in 6 key stations on network £2,837 plus VAT.
- Internal communication using the hub , the TFC newsletter, payslip, pop-ups, information sessions, production and time cost only.
- Partner communications - Partnership opportunity with Foundation of Light – Together for Children offered a stall at family learning graduations. Foundation of Light is also happy to distribute suitable literature during programme delivery from September when learning programme starts. Cost leaflet production costs only / time at graduate events.
- Digital communications - we will create an online expression of interest form on the TFC website – 38% of all UK enquiries are now reported to come through the web according to the Fostering Network, 2016. We will also develop the foster care section of the website, adding additional information focused on the campaign's key messages.

Phase two overview

- Repeat of any successful activity in Phase one, plus the below.
- City centre advertising boards – target key locations in the city at a time when footfall is at its peak. Cost is low, but exposure is high.
- Partner communications – posters / leaflets to council offices / GPs / partner organisations. Digital partner toolkit around foster care sent to partner organisations for dissemination through intranet / internal channels.
- Creation of foster care videos, sharing the stories of carers and Change Council young people and linking in to the key messages identified below. These videos will be shared on the TFC website, social media channels and used at information evenings.

Evaluation of Phase one and two will inform our approach going into Phase 3. Successful activity will be repeated, while other activity – print radio / digital advertising campaigns for example – will also be considered.

Traditional media advertising, radio / print, will be considered as part of our the campaign, but is unlikely to be the focus as it is expensive and difficult to target our key demographic, a point noted in the DFE's review of the fostering system (p 70).

3. Training and development

Alongside the recruitment and marketing campaign the parallel plan will be to continue to support and talent spot with in our current mainstream carers and encourage those who are interested in developing their skills to look after more complex young people. This will be underpinned by a reviewed and refreshed training and development offer for foster carers.

According to the DFE's report 'The fostering system in England: review', two-thirds of potential foster carers are lost during training. To minimise this we will review the content of our information sessions and information packs to ensure we're telling potential foster carers the right messages at the right times, preparing them for what is involved and managing expectations throughout the process.

Work is being undertaken with other areas of TFC and partners to provide additional support to carers looking after the most challenging young people. This has included Children & Young Peoples Service (preventative mental health service), early help, youth offending service, virtual school and a number of third sector organisations.

There is consideration being given to the possibility of remodelling internal services in such a way as to provide an innovative and more integrated response to managing complex young people crisis and support their foster carers.

Evaluation

It is essential that we evaluate the effectiveness of each strand of activity on an on-going basis, using this data to shape future phases of the strategy.

The effectiveness of a revised payment framework will be evaluated against a suite of indicators which will include feedback from applicants, current carers, numbers of applicants etc.

The marketing and recruitment strategy will be evaluated against the number of new enquiries during each phase of the campaign, how respondents heard about our offer and, should they drop out, record at what stage, and why.

To maximise return on marketing investment, it is also vital that we have the resources in place to respond to and manage enquiries that come in as a result of the campaign in a

timely manner. According to the DFE report, a study showed a quarter of respondents to one marketing campaign did not proceed because they had not been contacted following expressing an interest.

The training and development evaluation will be through individual feedback and on-going audit of improved practice alongside feedback from fostering officers through supervision

Next Steps

The next step is to develop an action plan that focuses on the 3 priority areas. This will be completed within a 3 month period, 1st December 2017 and will go through the appropriate governance process.

Alongside the development of the plan, work that is already on-going, as identified above, will continue and will be included in the action plan.

