

# Southend-on-Sea Borough Council

Report of Executive Director, Children & Public Health  
to

Cabinet

on

14<sup>th</sup> January 2021

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Agenda  
Item No

## Journey of the Child: Fostering and Adoption

People Scrutiny Committee  
Cabinet Member: Councillor Anne Jones  
Part 1 (Public Agenda Item)

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### 1. Purpose of Report

- To report on the contribution that the work of the Fostering and Adoption services make to securing positive outcomes for children and to Southend 2050 ambitions
- To report on the success and challenges experienced during 2019/20 and Q1 and Q2 of 2020/21
- To provide assurance that the Fostering and Adoption service continues to meet required statutory duties as regulated provision
- To meet National Minimum Standard 25.6 of the **Local Authority Adoption Services (England) Regulations 2003** which states that the Executive side of the Local Authority:
  - a) receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the agency
  - b) monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users
- To meet the requirements of **The Local Authority Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011** which states that the Executive side of the Local Authority has a responsibility to monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users and that they are satisfied that the service is complying with the conditions of registration.

## **2. Recommendations**

That the report is noted.

## **3. Background**

### **3.1 Statutory Framework**

Fostering and Adoption Services are regulated services. Due to updates, amendments and changes to the legislation and statutory guidance relating to these regulated services several standards must be met for the services to operate. The statutory framework includes The Local Authority Adoption Services (England) Regulations 2003 (Updated 2005 & 2013 & 2014 & 2017), Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4, 2011 The Adoption Agencies and Independent Review of Determinations (amendment) regulations 2011, The Local Authority Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (updated 2013, Fostering Minimum Standards 2011, Children and Social Work Act 2017, The Adoption minimum Standards 2011, Care Planning, placement & case review 2014, Adoption Reform Update 2018, and Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) Amendment regulations 2020.

### **3.2 Purpose**

The fostering and adoption services have statements of purpose which can be accessed on the Council website. The current statements of purpose will be written to comply with document accessibility guidance in during Q4 2020/21. The statements of purpose are included as appendices to this report.

#### **3.2.1 Adoption Service**

The Adoption Service provides a comprehensive range of service to children requiring adoption, the birth families of children who are adopted, adopters and children who have already been adopted. The service recruits and assesses prospective adopters and provides support to adopters both pre- and post-placement of children and adoption. The service supports children's social workers to determine whether a plan for adoption should be placed before the court, the type of adoptive family who will best meet their needs. They find adoptive placements for Southend children for whom adoption is the agreed plan. The Adoption Service assess adopters who wish to adopt from the United Kingdom, from overseas, foster carers wishing to adopt a child already in their care and step-parents and relatives wishing to adopt a child from within their family. The objectives of the Adoption Service are:

- To recruit sufficient adopters to ensure that children can be placed with a family that meets their needs
- Provide support post the making of the Adoption Order when needed
- Support contact between the birth family and the adoptive family when in the best interest of the child
- Provide full information to those considering adoption and welcome them without prejudice

- Protect all information held, including records to be held for 100 years from the making of the Adoption Order, in a secure and confidential manner

### **3.2.2 Fostering Service**

The Fostering Service recruits, assesses, and reviews the continued suitability of foster carers. They provide training, support, and supervision of the foster carers. Each fostering household has an allocated Supervising Social Worker who meets with them, at a minimum, once a month to provide support, challenge and oversight of the carers. The objectives of the Fostering Service are:

- to provide the best possible placements for children and young people to reach their full potential
- To recruit, assess and support foster carers so they can provide a wide range of placements, which meet the diverse needs of looked after children and young people
- To ensure that the Children's Pledge and Foster Carer Charter are embedded into all work undertaken by the service
- To ensure that sufficient resources are available through clear sufficiency planning, to meet the needs of children

The Fostering Service provide placements for Southend Looked After Children from birth to age 18. Foster carers provide 'Staying Put' placements for young people aged 18 and over if the young person wants to continue living with them after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Fostering Service assesses, trains, and supports kinship carers such as grandparents, aunts and uncles who express a wish to provide care for children in their family who cannot live with their birth parents.

### **3.3 Southend 2050**

The work of the Fostering and Adoption Services contributes to each of the Southend 2050 ambitions. In providing safe and secure families to Southend Looked After Children, including adoptive families, they can thrive from what are often challenging circumstances. Working in partnership with the children's allocated social workers, the Virtual School for looked after children, schools, colleges, early years settings, community groups and health colleagues the services can contribute to positive outcomes for children and young people. The children and young people are safe and well, they are able to become active citizens and contribute to their communities, they join clubs and take up hobbies, form positive friendships and are supported to achieve well in education and employment.

The work of the services contribute directly to closing the attainment gap in education and ensuring looked after children live close to home.

### **3.4 Achievements**

As with all services within Children's Services, and the Council as a whole, 2020 presented unprecedented and unpredicted challenge. The annual reports for the Fostering Service and Adoption Service are included as appendices and the reports contain detailed information about the volume, quality and impact of the work undertaken in 2019/20 and Q1 and Q2 of 2020/21.

In addition to the successful work to recruit, assess and support foster carers, adopters and the outcomes for the children placed with them, the service's achievements can best be seen in the response to Covid-19. Both services adapted their approaches to ensure that foster and adoptive families continued to receive high levels of support and for safeguarding processes to be robustly applied if required. They moved from face to face to virtual contact and foster carers have shared that they felt very well supported. The move to more virtual contact, and virtual meetings held using MS Teams, enabled the services to increase the contact they have with individuals. Due to the positive experience of foster and adoptive families this way of working will continue beyond the pandemic. The services currently conduct both virtual and face to face contact based on individual Covid-19 risk assessments completed for each family.

During 2019/20 23 children were adopted. This was the same number as in 2018/19. The Department for Education publish an adoption scorecard each year detailing the performance on local authorities on three key areas. The performance is reported for 3 year periods. Southend's position has remained high in the rankings of local authorities and our performance has improved year on year. Our children are matched with adoptive families with an average of 95 days against a national average of 178 days. For our children this means that they move into their forever family without delay. When permanence for children is achieved quickly it supports improved outcomes for them. Adoption agencies are now regionalised and our next adoption scorecard with report according to the performance of the Regional Adoption Agency.

During 2019/20 18 adoptive families were approved to adopt compared to 20 families in 2018/19. During Q1 and Q2 2020/21 a further 19 families have been approved to adopt despite the additional challenges brought by the pandemic. This is evidence of the strength of practice in the Adoption Service.

There have been no breakdowns of adoptive placements in Southend in 10 years. This is exceptional performance and shows that children placed with Southend's adopters thrive within their adoptive placement without needing to move back into the care system. The quality of the performance of the service was recognised by Ofsted in July 2019. They stated that *'Support for post adoption is currently mostly delivered in house by a highly trained team. Services are brought in and funded through the adoption support fund where needed. Given the size of Southend, decisions for support are able to progress in a timely manner and decisions are made into services to be provided without any delay. This we believe impacts the fact Southend has had no adoption disruptions for over 10 years.'*

In January 2020, a foster carer conference was held. It was well attended by foster carers and officers. The Executive Councillor for Children and Learning attended the event. From the conference the fostering service co-produced parts of the fostering improvement plan with carers. This has resulted in foster carers leading on projects to offer support to new carers and taking roles in the development of training.

The number and diversity of Fostering Panel members has been increased during the last 18 months. This was an area for improvement identified by an assessment of our fostering service undertaken by Essex County Council on our behalf in 2018. Fostering Panel members have adapted to new ways of working due to Covid-19 and longer panel meetings. This has strengthened the resilience of the Fostering Panel and the new panel members are able to draw on the skill and experience of long-standing members.

The Fostering Improvement Plan is progressing well. We have seen an increase in the compliance with key National Minimum Standards such as completion of annual household reviews and unannounced home visits to carers. The improvement is supported by the increase in management capacity within the fostering service. This is increasing further in early 2021 to ensure practice improvement continues at pace and the targets within the Financial Recovery Plan, relating to the use of external placements, are met. The progress and impact of the Fostering Improvement Plan is monitored at Children's Services Performance and Improvement Boards as well as the Placements and Resources Management Team.

The commitment of foster carers and adopters to provide the very best care to the most vulnerable children has not been impacted by Covid-19. These families have continued to put children first in these difficult times and should be applauded for this. Although the pandemic has led to a small number of families, understandably, reassessing whether they want to continue as carers the majority have continued even when they have conditions which means they are vulnerable to the virus.

### **3.5 Areas of challenge**

In April 2020 Diane Keens, Head of Placements and Resources, retired. She had led the adoption service in Southend, and subsequently the fostering service, for many years and her loss was felt keenly. Her role has been covered by Jo Hines who is an extremely experienced adoption leader and Chris Sandercombe, an experienced Head of Service.

Since March of this year the method of delivering the services has adapted to ensure the statutory duties continue to be met and children, carers and adopters continue to have positive contact with the services. Support groups have moved to being held virtually which has not always been as positive and accessible for all carers and adopters.

Since April 2020 16 foster carers have been de-registered. This is a large number for a small local authority. The reasons have been due to retirement, which links to the challenge of an aging foster carer population, young people being placed with kinship care becoming adults, Covid-19 leading to families reconsidering their priorities and deregistration due to the standards of care provided. In simple terms a backlog of de-registrations due to standards of care were robustly addressed during this period and it is not anticipated that the high number of de-registrations will continue.

The recruitment of foster carers continues to be a challenge. This is a challenge that is reflected nationally and regionally and actions to address the challenge are contained

within the Fostering Improvement Plan and the Sufficiency Strategy. Some methods of recruiting new carers have not been available due to Covid-19 such as attending community events such as Village Green.

Although performance on Fostering National Minimum Standards has improved it is not yet at target. We are confident that we will meet target during early 2021.

During 2019/20 a change in the view of the Judiciary of adoption as an option for permanence was seen nationally. This has resulted in fewer adoption orders being granted across England. In Southend, Essex, and Thurrock the use, by the Courts, of Special Guardianship Orders rather than Adoption Orders is becoming more common. This is despite a care plan for Adoption being agreed by the Local Authority Agency Decision Maker, a post held by the Director of Children's Services in Southend. The impact of this has been compounded during 2019/20 by the pandemic as Final Court hearings are being adjourned in an attempt to ensure all parties are able to meaningfully engage, and, due to caution on the part of some members of the Judiciary to grant final orders using virtual hearings due to the gravity and finality of the judgements. This will lead to delays in children securing permanence via adoption. The issue has been raised across with the Designated Family Judge by Directors of Children's Services in the region.

### **3.6 Plans for continued improvement and recovery**

As detailed in 3.4 and 3.5 we have a Fostering Improvement Plan in place, the progress of which is overseen at Children's Services Performance and Improvement Boards. The plan focuses on improving the quality of practice, ensuring National Minimum Standards are met and increasing the number of in house foster carers.

The plans for adoption include;

- To recruit, assess and support people through all aspects of the adoption process
- To work closely within our RAA to develop stronger aligned practice across the region
- Further develop post adoption support
- Further develop family intervention work
- Learn from and embrace the creative practice achieved as a result of Covid 19 while seeking to ensure the needs of the children requiring permanency through adoption are met.



The plans for the fostering service include:

- Recruitment will remain a primary focus.
- Strengthen the Fostering Service embedding the progress made
- Increase the management capacity from January 2021 to support improvement work
- Ensure that Southend is competitive with the Independent Fostering Agencies and transparent with our carers
- Work with our fostering colleagues to support young people to feel safe and well, to maintain both stable placements and to fully engage and succeed with education placements so they in turn can embrace opportunity and prosper in their own future goals.

The success of Fostering Improvement Plan will contribute to meeting the need to reduce expenditure on external placements. It is a key element of the Financial Recovery Planning for Children's Services.

#### **4. Other Options**

None identified

#### **5. Reasons for Recommendations**

The requirement for the Local Authority Executive to review the annual reports of the Fostering and Adoption Service is contained with statutory regulation.

#### **6. Corporate Implications**

##### **6.1 Contribution to the Southend 2050 Road Map**

The work of the Fostering and Adoption Services as described in this report makes a contribution to the 5 Southend 2050 ambitions. The areas of the road map, over the next 3 years, that are most strongly contributed to include, although are not exclusive to; the development of an agile working culture, reducing attainment gaps and increasing aspiration and educational attainment, increasing apprenticeships, targeted violence and vulnerability support, improving technical literacy and ensuring all young people including looked after children and care leavers have appropriate accommodation.

##### **6.2 Financial Implications**

The work of the Fostering Service is making a contribution to Children's Services Financial Recovery Plan as it will reduce the use of costly external placements for children.

##### **6.3 Legal Implications**

There are no identified legal implications as the fostering and adoption annual reports and statements of purpose will continue to be brought to Cabinet.

##### **6.4 People Implications**

There are no identified people implications to the recommendations.

##### **6.5 Property Implications**

There are no identified property implications to the recommendations.

## 6.6 Consultation

There is no identified consultation requirement with these recommendations.

## 6.7 Equalities and Diversity Implications

The Journey of the Child report has no identified equality and diversity implications.

## 6.8 Risk Assessment

No risk has been identified.

## 6.9 Value for Money

There is no impact on value for money within the recommendations.

## 6.10 Community Safety Implications

There are no community safety implications identified.

## 6.11 Environmental Impact

There is no identified environmental impact.

## **7. Background Papers**

None

## **8. Appendices**

1. Annual Fostering Report
2. Fostering Statement of Purpose
3. Annual Adoption Report
4. Adoption of Purpose