



**Corporate Parenting Sub
Overview and Scrutiny
Committee**
4 July 2019

TITLE OF REPORT: **Placement Sufficiency**

REPORT OF: **Caroline O'Neill, Strategic Director Care, Wellbeing and Learning**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an update on Gateshead's Fostering Service, highlighting the progress made over the last 12 months and the plan for developing the service, paying particular attention to the recruitment and retention of Gateshead's Foster Carers.

Policy Context

1. The information and proposals in this report are in line with the Council's statutory duties.
2. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) is responsible for registration, regulation and inspection of services for young people. All schools, early years provision, children's residential care, fostering and adoption services must be registered and have regular assessments and inspections. This applies to all providers in the public, private and voluntary sectors

Background

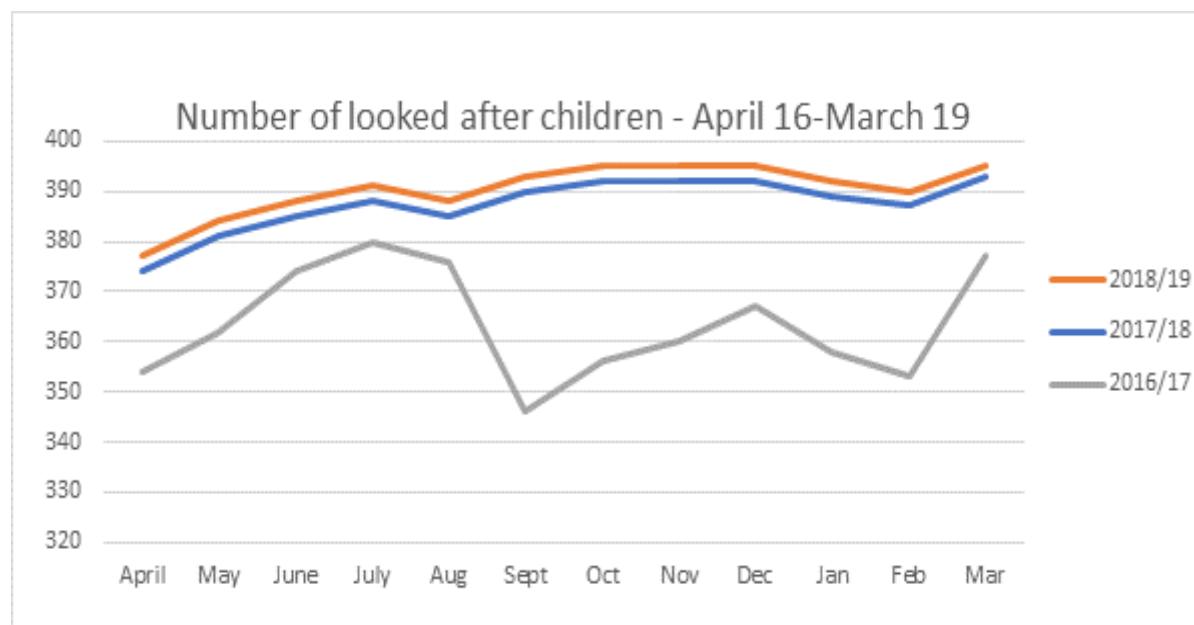
3. The National Fostering Standards for England were written to ensure that looked after children, birth families, prospective/approved foster carers and the general public understand what they can expect from the fostering services. Many of the National Fostering Standards restate what is already required either by primary legislation or regulations in which case both local authorities and voluntary fostering agencies must comply with them. The national minimum standards help the registration authorities in determining whether the fostering agency is meeting the relevant regulatory requirements.
4. Inspection and regulation by external and independent agencies assist with ensuring that children and young people are achieving the best possible outcomes and are being kept safe and free from harm. Monitoring of service outcomes and inspection and regulation reports also give an independent

account to local citizens on how well services are doing and how public money is being spent.

5. In April 2011 the Government published new National Minimum Standards and Regulations for Fostering Services in England. Whilst there is no requirement under the regulations for the executive side of the local authority to receive written reports on the performance of its fostering service, it is deemed good practice to produce an annual report in order to monitor the management and outcomes of the Service and ensure that the agency is effective and achieving good outcomes for the children in its care.
6. Whilst there is no guidance on what should be covered in the report, there should be sufficient information on all activities undertaken by the fostering service including information relating to service development.
7. The information in this report gives an update on the activities and progress of the fostering service between April 2018 and March 2019 and highlights some real progress the fostering service has made over the past year. We look forward to building on this work and continuing to improve outcomes for children and families in Gateshead.

The Fostering Service

8. The fostering service staff team is made up of one Senior Practice Supervisor, two Practice Supervisors, ten FTE Experienced Child and Family Workers, and a part time Recruitment and Marketing Officer. The team is supported by a Business Support unit with dedicated support to foster carer payments, panel and placement administration.



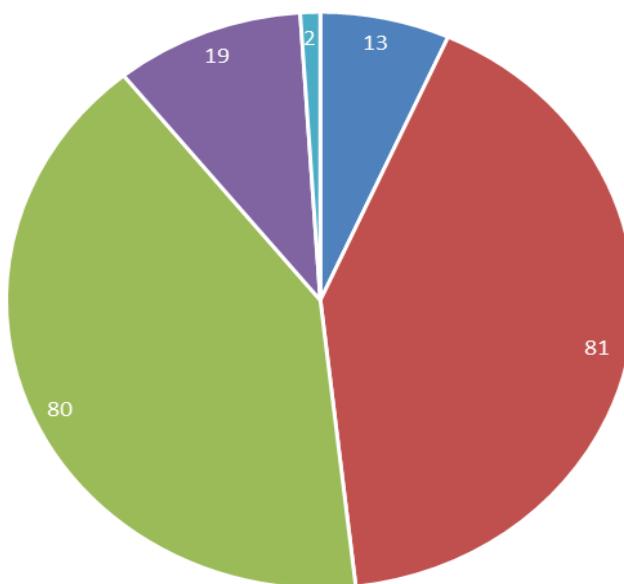
- Over the last year the number of Looked After Children in Gateshead has ranged from **373** to **405** with most of these children being placed with in-house foster carers.
- Many of the children leaving care throughout the year are those who are already living with relatives under Fostering Regulations where other legal orders are obtained to secure their permanence with that family i.e. Special Guardianship or Residence Orders. This does not free up any fostering placements within the Service and consequently resources and placements have continued to be limited. This issue of limited placement capacity is not unique to Gateshead as the Fostering Network estimates that there is a shortfall of 8,750 fostering placements across the whole of the U.K.

Payment for Skills

- Gateshead Council seeks to continuously improve outcomes for Looked After Children to improve their life chances and opportunities. These outcomes are closely linked to the achievement of placement stability and ensuring that children have placement choice and are subsequently matched and placed with the right carers. These factors were at the heart of the Payment for Skills scheme which was developed to operate through a payment model that clearly defines the expectations. This has now been in place since September 2012.
- This evidence-based approach is also being used in the assessment of new foster carers, with the Fostering Panel linking the recommendation of approval of new carers with the Payment for Skills level.

Breakdown of Foster Carers by Payment for Skills Level

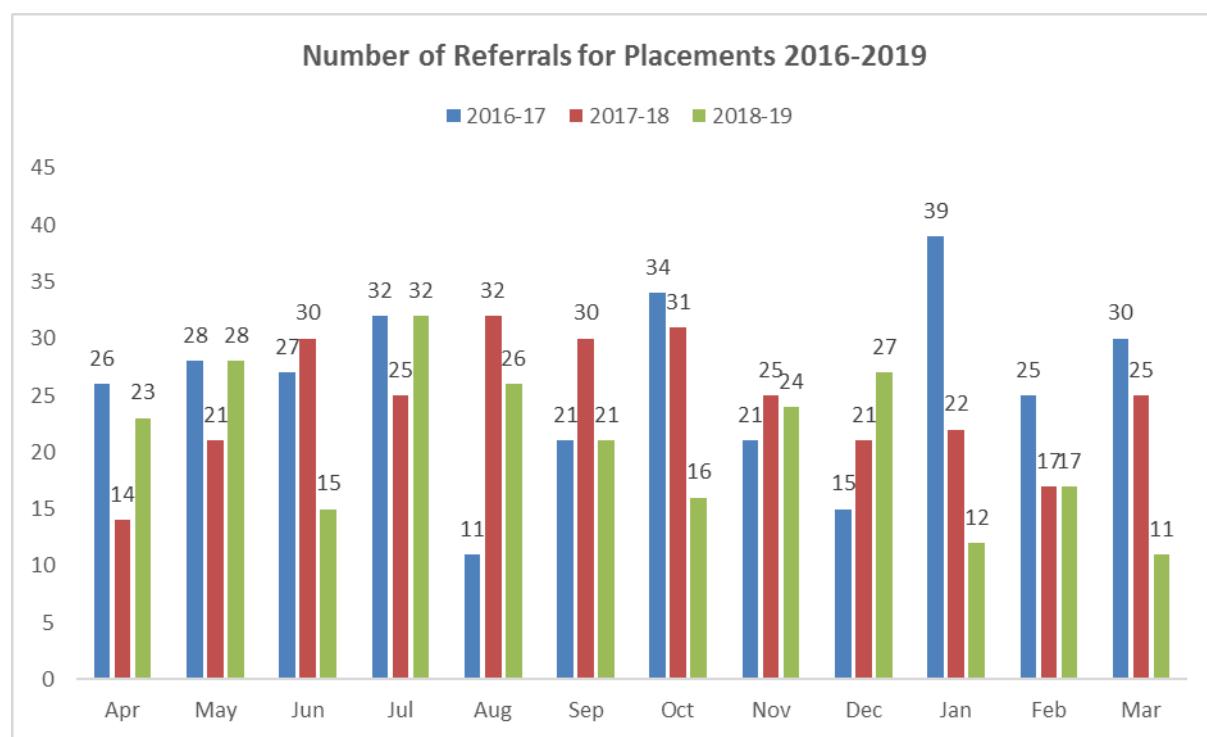
■ No Level ■ Level 1 ■ Level 2 ■ Level 3 ■ Level 4



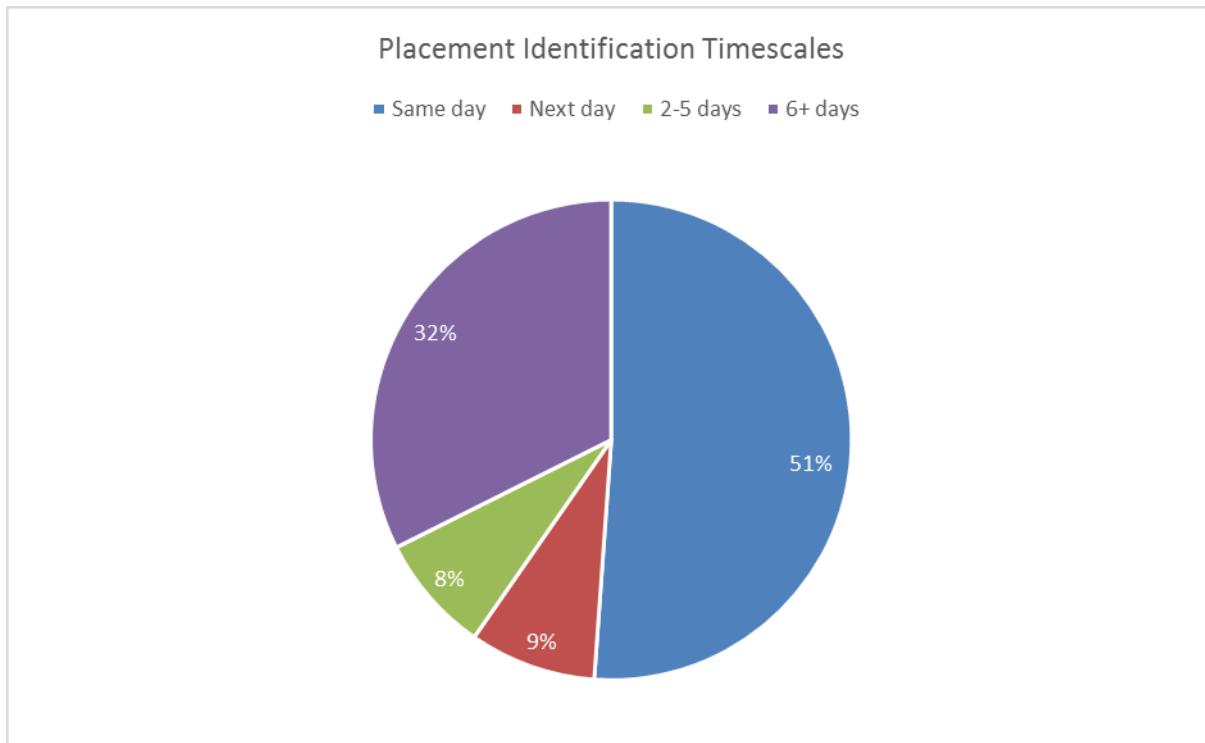
Activity within the Service

Referrals for Placements

13. Gateshead's social work teams made **252** referrals to the Fostering Service for placements between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019. This is a decrease of **14%** on the previous year. Of these referrals, **176** (70%) placements were subsequently made and **76** (30%) were withdrawn by social workers as alternative arrangements were made for the children, including placements with family or friends.



14. In contrast to the previous year, the highest numbers of referrals during 2018-19 were received in May, July and December 2018. The highest demands for placements during the year were on the 0-4years and 10-15years age range.
15. The majority of placement referrals from social work teams are for emergency requests where 48% of placements are needed within one working day of the referral being submitted. 13% are needed within 2-5 days and 39% of referrals were needed within 1 week.



16. Over the year **25** sibling groups were referred to the Service for a total of **55** children, a decrease of 41% compared to last year. Of those **25** groups, **22** were placed together. In general requests are primarily to keep siblings together. This is often difficult to achieve given the size of sibling groups referred and has resulted in a number of sibling groups being placed in Independent Fostering placements. However, in the last year the Service has continued to work on reducing the number of sibling groups having to be split and as a result, there have only been **three** groups placed separately. Two of these were sibling groups of four children that needed to be placed as emergencies.

Size of Sibling Group	Number Referred and Placed	Number of Groups Placed Together	Number of Groups Split	Total Children
2	24	23	1	48
3	3	2	1	9
4	2	2	0	8

Independent Fostering Placements

17. Occasionally, due to the type of placements requested and the availability of our own foster carers we are unable to place children in house. In this event the Service commissions placements through external independent fostering agencies, which are more expensive than placing a child with our own foster carers.

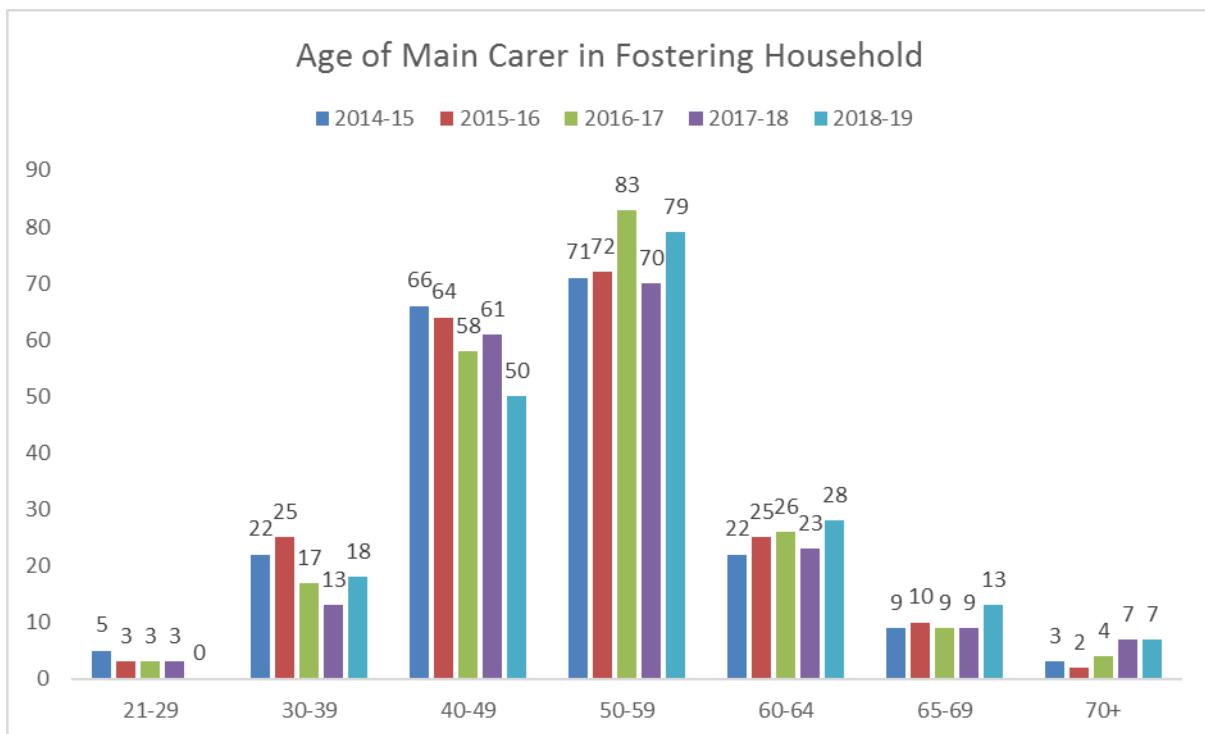
18. All independent fostering placements are approved and monitored by the regular High Needs Case Review Panel which is chaired by Elaine Devaney, Service Director – Children and Families. Every effort is made to keep the use of these placements to a minimum, and to return children to our own foster placements as soon as possible. However, if there are ongoing care proceedings the Service is often directed by Court to leave the children in their placements until these proceedings are concluded.
19. As of 31st March 2019, Gateshead had **19** Independent fostering placements for children between 1-17years. Of the **17** placements commissioned during the last financial year, the majority placements were needed for teenagers aged 14 years and older with complex and challenging behaviour where there were no in-house foster carers with the necessary skills or space to accommodate them. Four were mother & baby placements that were required due to a significant increase in placements for babies being requested.
20. Two sibling groups were also placed in independent placements where the requirement from social workers was to keep the children together and it was not possible to do this within the Service.
21. Between the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019 independent placements ended for a total of **12** children which helped the Service's aim of reducing independent placements. **Six** of these children were placed with Gateshead's foster carers and two sets of carers transferred to Gateshead Council from their independent agency.

Recruitment & Retention

The Foster Carers

22. At 31 March 2019 there were **195** approved fostering households, a slight increase on the previous year. During the year ending 31 March 2019, **27** new fostering households were approved at Fostering Panel, 17 sets of new foster carers and 10 sets of connected people. There were however 22 sets of foster carers deregistered.
23. The Fostering Service provides a wide range of resources including short break and emergency, short term, task centred and long term/permanent placements for Looked After Children and Young People. The Service also provides short breaks to families who have a child with a disability through the Home from Home scheme and we also have a growing number of foster carers who are providing placements for extended family members or connected children. Many foster carers can offer more than one type of placement, which increases the flexibility within the Service regarding the types of placements we can offer.
24. The majority of foster carers within Gateshead come from a White British ethnic background; however, we also have fostering households from the Pakistani and Orthodox Jewish communities. This reflects the shortage of foster carers from ethnic minorities that is experienced nationally. Though a

high proportion of children in placement during the year ending March 2019 were White, our carers also provided placements for those from other ethnic groups.



25. We continue to have a high proportion of older foster carers within the Service, with the average age of a foster carer increasing slightly from last year to 53 years old in 2018-19. 65% (127) of main carers within fostering households are over the age of 50 and currently provide approximately 63% of the potential available full-time placements. This is an increase on the figure of 58% reported last year.
26. The national trend shows that over the next four years between 10 and 15% of these older foster carers will retire and therefore it is a priority for us to ensure that we recruit enough new carers not only to replace those retiring but also to continue to increase the overall numbers of fostering households to between **200** and **230**. This would provide a significant increase in placement choice and assist in reducing the numbers of children being placed in independent fostering agencies.
27. The Fostering Service has recruited a total of **154** new foster carers in the last five years, with 25% (48) of fostering households having two years or less service with the Authority. This number also includes Connected Person carers for specific named children. We also have a cohort of very experienced foster carers, with 12% of our fostering households have over 16 years' service, with two households fostering for over 30 years

Connected person

28. This area of work continues to increase as more children are being placed with family members and given the tight timescales for assessments panel are monitoring these closely to ensure compliance with the regulations. To ensure compliance with regulations, this work is monitored and regularly reviewed by one of the practice supervisors within the team. The numbers of assessments have fluctuated between 12 and 36 and the average at any one time is around 24.
29. These assessments are also used towards court applications for Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders. This demonstrates multi agency working between the Fostering Service and the various social work teams.
30. The service recognises that these carers are often dealing with complex family situations and have implemented special support groups for connected person carers. We have also developed strong regional links with the national support group Grandparents Plus to offer additional support to these families.

Recruitment

31. The marketing plan for 2018-19 focussed on providing a presence across a wide range of media channels with the aim of promoting fostering to those living within the Gateshead area and surrounding 20-mile radius.

Promotional Activity

32. Promotional activities were mainly generic but focussed specifically on fostering to reach out to as many potential foster carers as possible throughout the year. The key messaging throughout the year was focussed around the following three core messages:
 - Is caring for sisters' worth it? Absolutely...
 - Is caring for a teenager worth it? Absolutely...
 - Is fostering worth it? Absolutely...
33. These messages were consistently applied across all advertising formats to reinforce the Gateshead Fostering Service brand.
34. Promotional activity throughout the year has included the use of wider Council resources to target all Gateshead residents. The following outlines the main activity undertaken throughout the year.
35. Gateshead Council activity:
 - Up to date information on the website
 - Regular use of council TV screens in the Civic Centre and leisure facilities
 - Regular adverts and features in Council News and Council Info
 - Civic centre railing banners
 - Banners in the civic centre foyer

- Gateshead Now – direct email to Gateshead residents
- Promotional stand during foster care fortnight in Gateshead Civic Centre
- Gateshead Live (Event newsletter)
- Digital advertising (Council Facebook, Fostering Facebook, Twitter & targeted google adverts)
- Radio adverts in all council leisure facilities

Other external activity:

- Public transport (Bus & Metro advertising)
- Poster and business card circulation
- Gateshead NHS staff handbook
- Living North magazine direct email
- BT link kiosks
- South Shields Summer Festival advertise

What is working for us?

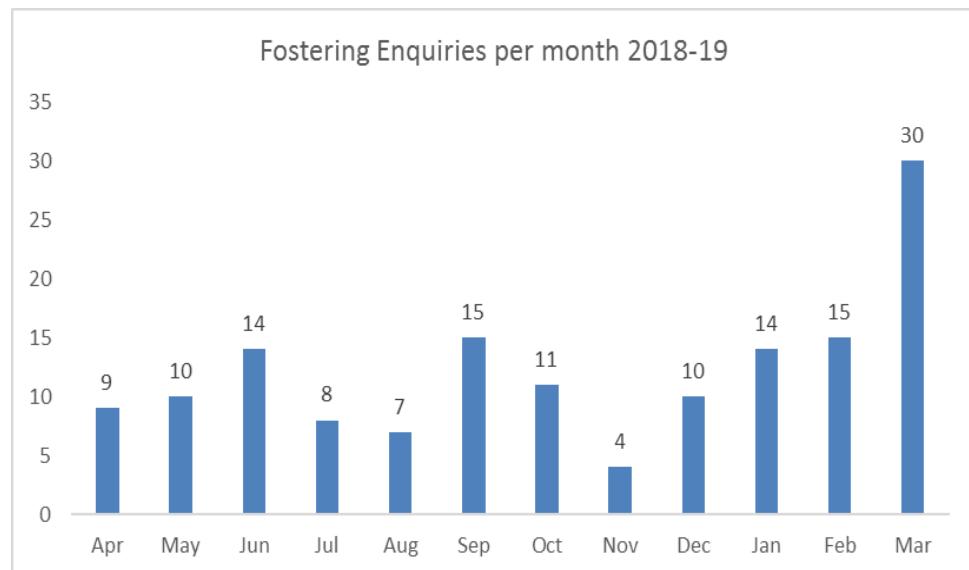
36. All enquiries are tracked to enable the service to make best use of advertising channels and ensure the marketing budget is used effectively.
37. The top six channels cited overall are:
 - Council Website
 - Bridge Banner (*option no longer available*)
 - Radio Advert
 - Council News
 - Poster
 - Local Press
38. The top six channels sited between April 2018 and March 2019 are:
 - Council Website
 - Facebook
 - Council News
 - Bridge Banner
 - Public Transport
 - Other Website/Local Press

What does this tell us?

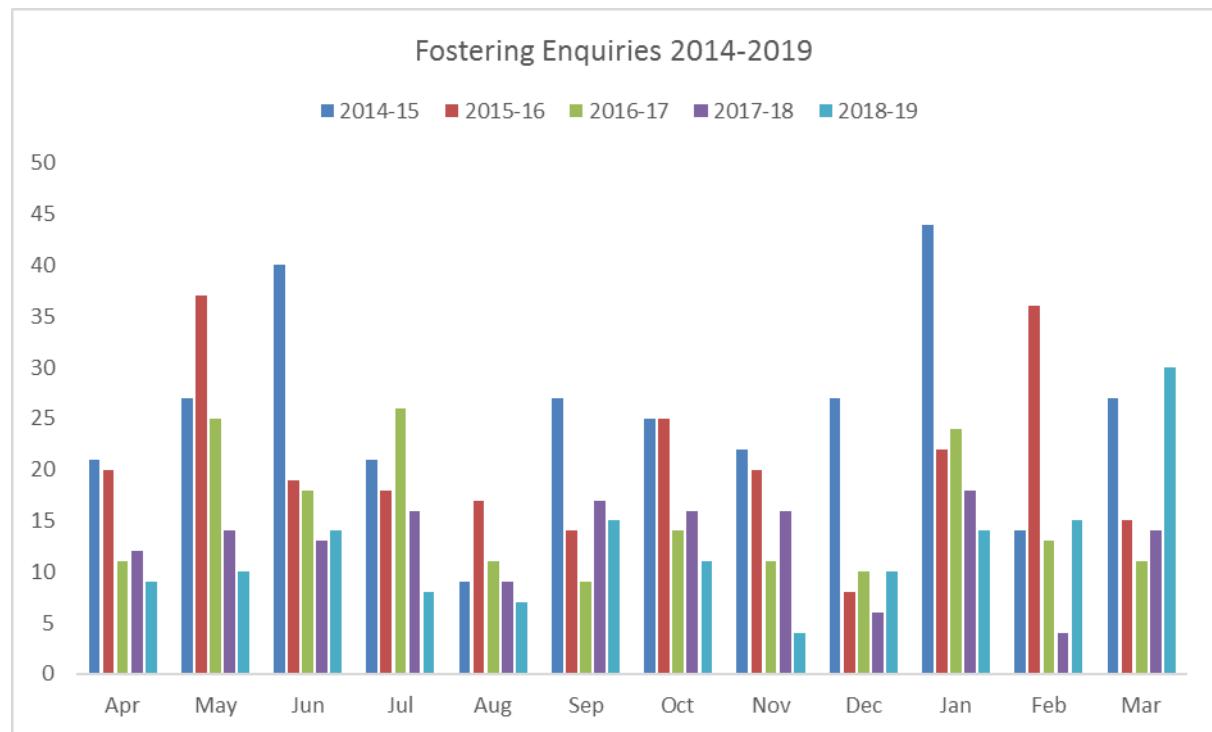
39. The service is increasing the use of digital channels and we can see an increase in enquiries generated via these channels. Enquirers are consistently using the website to find their information and the resident's magazine also consistently performs well. Other "paid for advertising fluctuates" in terms of effectiveness so this continues to be monitored. This information will be analysed further to inform the marketing plan for 2019 and beyond.

Enquiries

40. In the year to 31 March 2019 the service received a total of **147** enquiries, a slight decrease in 5% on the previous year. However, the graph below shows that the enquiry rate in March increased significantly due to the increased activity on digital platforms. The enquiry rate will be monitored to evaluate whether marketing activity generates adequate enquiries.



The graph below shows the level of enquiries over the last four years.



Conversion Rate

41. The Local Authority Fostering Service benchmark for 2015 showed that nationally 11% of enquiries proceed to approved carers.
42. The conversion rate for the service during 2018-19 has decreased to 12% (based on the number of approvals this year compared to the number of enquiries received). This rate is still comparable with the national rate and will be monitored.

The next steps

43. The Marketing and Recruitment Officer Post was transferred to the Corporate Communications Team in December 2018 to enable the post holder to work in closer collaboration with the Corporate Communication Team in order to develop the future marketing activity, whilst remaining embedded in the Fostering Service.
44. The recruitment strategy is linked to the sufficiency strategy and will be reviewed with input from Corporate Communications to ensure it is robust enough to deliver its objectives of recruiting 30 sets of non-connected foster carers. The marketing plan will then be developed outlining how we will achieve the objectives.
45. Our priority will be to increase the number of foster placements for all children, whilst recognising there are specific groups of young people who are harder to place, and specific advertising will be required. This includes children with complex needs, solo placements, sibling placements and teenagers.
46. A plan has been developed for the year to utilise the “free of charge” marketing tools as well as deliver “paid for” campaigns to ensure that the Gateshead Council’s Fostering Service receives our fair share of the market.
47. Development work has commenced on improving the customer experience, considering best practice and understanding our foster carers to inform our future marketing campaigns and ensure they are as effective as possible.
48. We are aiming to gradually transfer to a more digital approach whilst still retaining some offline presence to capture those individuals who do not use digital platforms.

Retention

49. Retention of existing foster carers continues to be a high priority for the Fostering Service and foster carers are provided with extensive support and training.
50. Each fostering household is reviewed on an annual basis, chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). This process uses feedback from the foster carers, children in placement and children within the fostering family, as

well as the carers' supervising social worker and social workers for children who are and who have been placed with the foster carers. This feedback is valued by the service and is used to develop and improve service delivery.

51. Retention of our current foster carers is pivotal in ensuring that we maintain our numbers of in-house foster carers. This will ultimately aid the service in respect of placement choice which then leads to greater placement stability for looked after children. This work is managed and overseen by the team manager who meets with foster carers who indicate that they no longer wish to foster. Exit interviews with foster carers who resign will also be undertaken to establish what the service could do to reduce the number of foster carers leaving.
52. The 'Local Authority Fostering Services in England performance benchmark report 2013/14' shows that nationally 12% of foster carers left their service. In Gateshead 22 sets of foster carers were de-registered at panel, equating to 8% which is lower than the national average.
53. The service does look at reasons why foster carers leave the service – see table below.

REASON	NUMBER
Resignation	4
Retirement	5
Change of personal circumstances e.g. return to work, new partner	2
Allegations/concerns	2
Child Arrangement Order or Special Guardianship Order for carer	3
Connected person – rehabilitation home	1
Connected Person – Child turned 18	3
Impact on Family/Unable to manage fostering task	2

Training

54. The service continues to develop the training offered to all approved foster carers as we see this as a key area to enable us to provide young people with the highest quality and skilled carers possible. The training offered includes subjects such as
 - Attachment,
 - Child Protection Awareness,
 - Equality and Diversity,
 - Emergency First Aid,
 - Level 1 Food Hygiene,

- Life Story Work,
 - Promoting Positive Behaviour,
 - Recording Skills
 - Safer Caring Training.
55. Full time foster carers are expected to complete these courses within the first 12 months of their approval, and Home from Home and respite carers are given 18 months to complete these. Foster carers are also encouraged to attend further training through their fostering career. These courses, as well as any refresher training they require, are identified through discussions with their supervising social worker and forms their professional development plan. This is also linked to the payment for skills criteria and levels.
56. All foster carers under the Fostering Regulations must complete their Training, Support and Development (TSD) Standards for Foster Carers within 12 months of approval. Preparation training and regular workshops are provided for foster carers to help them with the information they need to be able to complete their portfolio, along with giving them practical hints and tips on gathering evidence and information.
57. The service also requires all foster carers on Payment for Skills level 2 or above to complete their Level 3 Diploma for the Children and Young People's Workforce.
58. The training offered and taken up by Gateshead's carers is monitored and evaluated to ensure we are providing our carers with the skills and knowledge they need to support young people and help them achieve the best possible outcomes.

Support Groups

59. Regular support groups for foster carers have continued to take place covering a wide range of relevant topics including
- Early Years,
 - Advocacy,
 - Sexual Exploitation,
 - Long Term Training
 - Delegated Authority
60. Specialist speakers are regularly invited to attend support groups. They have proven to be very successful with positive feedback from both foster carers and invited speakers.
61. A consultation with foster carers takes place annually to help develop the support groups and to find out what carers would like from future support groups. This information has been used by the service to shape the format and frequency of the groups.
62. Non-attendance at support groups is also monitored by the service with foster carers being regularly reminded by their supervising social workers of the

importance of attendance to their professional development along with the expectations under Payment for Skills.

Email updates

63. Regular emails to carers about the Service and its recruitment activity have continued throughout the year as well as updates via the Facebook page.

Christmas Party and Summer Family Fun Day

64. As a way of recognising that fostering involves the whole family, we host an annual Family Fun Day and Christmas Party.
65. Feedback from the carers and young people in attendance continued to be very positive and they welcome the opportunity to spend “quality time” with their families and fellow foster families, as well as colleagues from across the service.

Service Development

66. In addition to working to implement any proposed new governmental reforms to fostering practice, the key areas for development within the Fostering service are:
 - Undertake targeted recruitment campaigns to increase the number of foster placements for all ages of children.
 - Ensure the recruitment strategy is robust enough to provide a choice of appropriate placements.
 - Recruit 30 new sets of foster carers
 - Develop a specialist fostering scheme to support foster carers to care for children with complex, needing a solo occupancy placement
 - Develop the training and support offered to foster carers who are considering caring for teenagers with complex needs.
 - Ensure diligent work is undertaken with regards to placement stability.
 - Continue to reduce the use of Independent Fostering Placements.
 - Continue to monitor the Fostering Service and evaluate all activities to ensure that the best performance and outcomes possible are achieved.

Recommendation

67. That the Corporate Parenting OSC are asked to consider and comment on the content of this report.

Contact: Jill Little

Ext 3420