



North Tyneside Council

Fostering Strategy 2019-21



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Introduction

North Tyneside Council has pledged to the children and young people of the Borough that it will only care for them when it has first worked tirelessly to keep them safe within their family home. I am delighted to say that we successfully deliver on this pledge day-in, day-out and hundreds of children remain within their family home and connected to their community because of the help and support that the Council and its partners provide to make it safe for them to do so.

Sometimes, sadly, children and young people do have to live elsewhere to keep them safe. This is never an easy decision and not one we take lightly. If it is absolutely necessary to move them from their family home, we do all that we can to place a child or young person in the care of someone known to them and part of their network. I am pleased to say that I can give countless examples of where we have worked incredibly hard to support carers to make their commitment to care for a child or young person a reality. We do so because children and young people have told us that carers known to them help to soften the impact of having to leave their own home. There are about 75 children helped in this way by the Council at any one time.

For a range of reasons, sometimes the network of family and friends around a child or young person are not able to care for them. This is why Foster Carers are such a special and hugely important part of what the Council does to safeguard children and young people. At any one time, over 120 children and young people are cared for by some of the Borough's true heroes. They may not wear superhero capes and costumes, but as they walk along the sea front, shop or live next door to you, they are making one of the most amazing contributions to the life of our community – opening their door and their lives to a child or young person in need of love and care.

This Strategy is all about making what is already strong just that bit stronger. It details how we will seek over the next three years to do something which sounds straight forward – ***recruit the right number of Foster Carers with the right skills for the children and young people who need our care***. It is an ambitious plan, but rightly so. The children and young people of the Borough deserve no less.

Peter Earley Lead member for Children's Services

Julie Firth, Assistant Director

Aims and Objectives

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

1. To increase the total number of local Foster Carers available for the children and young people of North Tyneside
2. To increase the number of Foster Carers with the skills to care for teenagers
3. To increase the number of Foster Carers with the skills to care for sibling groups
4. To improve the resilience of our Foster Carers through our support to them, reducing the number of placements which break down
5. Cease the use of Independent Fostering Agency placements by the Council
6. Reduce the number of Children's Home placements for children and young people in favour of placements with skilled Foster Carers

National Context

- Most children in care are cared for in foster placements. 55,200 (73%) children in care on 31 March 2018 were in foster placements, an increase in numbers from 53,010 in 2017 and 51,850 in 2016;
- There has been a shift in the profile of children coming into care with a declining number aged less than 5 years (this may reflect the increasing use of Special Guardianship Orders for younger children who are placed with family and connected people);
- The largest age group of children who are now fostered are teenagers aged 10–15 years (39%);
- The ‘Staying Put’ initiative has also changed the profile of Foster Care, with a 17% increase in the number of young people in Foster Care turning 18 and still living with their former foster carer;
- The children and young people 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 require specialist placements. As a result there has been a significant use of and growth in Independent Fostering Agencies (33%);
- Independent Fostering Agencies are 5 times more successful at recruiting than Local Authorities;
- There is estimated to be a national shortage of 5,900 Fostering Households – demand outstripping supply;
- The lack of Foster Carers means that matching – the decision which Foster Carers are best able to meet the needs of a child or young person – is overwhelmingly supply led and not needs led. Research has suggested that in as many as half of all placements, the Social Worker has no choice at all when choosing carers.

North Tyneside Context

- Over the past 5 years, the number of children in the care of North Tyneside Council has remained relatively stable. The number is however higher (76 per 10,000) than the national average (64 per 10,000), though lower than all but one of the North East Local Authorities;
- The children and young people that have entered our care have more complex difficulties including serious physical and mental health problems and developmental problems;
- Over the last 5 years the number of Foster Carers we have approved as our local carers have reduced;
- The age profile of our carers is increasing, with a number planning to retire in the near future;
- We have a particular need for Foster Carers skilled at caring for teenagers; with 85% of our children needing care being in the 11-15 year olds age band;
- We have a need for more Foster Carers who are skilled at caring for sibling groups. Only 40% of sibling groups have been able to be placed together
- We recruit in an increasingly competitive market place for new carers, with other Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies actively recruiting, some offering higher fees and allowances;
- The average cost of an Independent Fostering Agency placement is three times higher than that of a North Tyneside Foster Carer;
- Some children and young people placed in a Children's Home could be placed with skilled Foster Carers were such carers available;
- Our lack of Foster Carers means that matching – the decision which Foster Carers are best able to meet the needs of a child or young person – is not always as needs led as it could be

Our Ambitions

Within 3 years we will:

- No longer use any Independent Fostering Agency placements
- Recruit an additional 30 Fostering Households, of which 10 will offer specialist placements
- Place 90% of our children in care with our own local Foster Carers, keeping them connected to their community
- Place 80% of sibling groups together

Our Plan

Consult more widely and more often

We acknowledge that we have not consulted with our Fostering Community as often as we should have done in the past. The development of this Strategy is evidence of our commitment to change. We have worked in partnership with the Fostering Community to develop our plan, listening closely to what our Foster Carers have told us. We will in future ensure that we meaningfully and genuinely co-produce the best possible way forward.

We will:

- Increase our use of surveys to Foster Carers to ensure the collective voice of our Fostering Community is heard and their views and experiences understood;
- Increase the range of Foster Care Support Groups so that our Fostering Community has a representative voice on issues affecting particular aspects of the role;
- Ensure that Leaders and Managers of the Fostering Service meet regularly and in different forums with as many of our Fostering Community as possible so that we make full use of our Foster Carers' experiences and ideas to develop the best possible service for children and young people;
- Undertake regular reviews of the progress of this Strategy so that it delivers in the way we all intended it to;
- Consult on the development of the next Strategy in two years' time so our Fostering Community remains central to our Service Planning.

Pay more and pay differently

Our payment structure is no longer fit for purpose – it does not reflect the variety and complexity of the fostering role and has in recent years failed to keep up with innovations in payments made by other fostering providers. It is no longer the competitive offer we need to deliver on our ambitions. Most importantly, it does not value the extraordinary commitment and contribution of our Fostering Community. As our consultation work clearly evidenced, it is time for a new approach.

We will replace our payments structure, simplifying some elements and enhancing others. We will make it more transparent. We will also increase the overall value of the payments we make.

We will:

- Introduce a Payment for Skills structure with three payment bands linked to competency, skills and training: 'Accredited', 'Advanced' and 'Specialist';
- Increase the fees we pay to Carers, linked to the Payment for Skills structure;
- Increase the allowance we pay to Carers of 16 year olds and above;
- Increase the amount we pay to Carers for Short Break Care of children and young people;
- Increase the amount we pay for mileage driven by Carers;
- Increase the amount we pay as an allowance to Carers for clothing for children and young people in an emergency;
- Increase the scope of equipment provided to Foster Carers;
- Align the amount of direct payment to young people in Foster Care to those in residential accommodation;
- Align the 'Teen Fee' allowance paid to Carers to 13 years of age or more;
- Simplify the rates paid for Child-minding to a single hourly rate;
- Remove inconsistencies in additional allowances paid to Carers for the placement of siblings, simplifying payments to a multiple placement allowance for Foster Carers with three or more children in care;
- Continue to pay the full amount Carers are required to pay in Council Tax for having spare rooms available in their home (the 'bedroom tax');
- Commit to review the payments on an annual basis to ensure we pay our Carers an amount which is fair and competitive in an ever-changing marketplace.

Offer more and better support

Our Fostering community does an extraordinary job welcoming into their homes, their families and their lives some of the most vulnerable children and young people in the Borough. They do so with warmth, skill and good humour and regularly show remarkable resilience and tenacity that goes way beyond the extra-mile. We have carers that advocate, care for and love the children and young placed with them as if they were their own and in so doing provide the best possible homes for children in care to grow up in. We know however, that occasionally, the Fostering role can be overwhelming, frustrating, sometimes too much or even scary. We know it is at this point that we need to provide high quality, effective and meaningful support.

We will:

- Continue to provide our much-valued, dedicated Foster Carer Advice and Support telephone service which is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and enables members of our Fostering Community to speak immediately and directly to a specialist Fostering Social Worker;
- Continue to offer our Fostering Community the opportunity for less experienced Carers to 'buddy' more experienced carers for peer advice, support and mentoring;
- Increase the number of Foster Care Support Groups within the Borough, recognising the diversity of our Fostering Community;
- Provide specialist support to our Fostering Community from the Raising Health and Education of Looked After Children (RHELAC) including:
 - Attachment Training;
 - Theraplay;
 - Counselling;
 - Behaviour Management Strategies.
- Enhance our training offer to our Fostering Community with a particular focus on equipping Carers to meet the needs of children and young people with complex additional social, emotional and mental health needs;
- Provide an EASE Card enabling our Fostering Community themselves to access local facilities such as libraries and leisure centres at a reduced rate;

- Negotiate with providers of leisure activities within the Borough possible reductions in costs for our Fostering Community;
- A commitment to explore best practice models and approaches such as 'Mockingbird'.

Make the Fostering role more visible and more accessible

We are aware that other providers of Foster Care within the North East have raised their public profile through media campaigns in recent years in order to support their recruitment in an increasingly competitive marketplace for prospective Foster Carers. North Tyneside has not been as proactive in raising its profile as it could have been and this has, in part, been reflected in the numbers of Foster Carers applying to join our Fostering Community. We are therefore committed to trying new things and doing things differently than we have done before.

We will:

- For the first time have a dedicated annual budget allocated to the Fostering Service to support marketing activities. The Fostering Service will use this budget to purchase:
 - Advertising on buses within the Borough;
 - Advertising on local radio;
 - Advertising on Social media;
 - Advertising through the placement of Banners in public areas within the Borough
 - Advertising through the distribution and display of Posters and Post Cards in public areas within the Borough
- Continue to use North Tyneside Council communications to residents;
- Work with partner agencies such as Police, Health and Education to raise awareness of the Fostering role and recruitment through the development of a 'toolkit' of messages and images that can be used;
- Increase the number of 'Information Evening' Events held by the Fostering Service

- Refresh our 'Information Packs' to ensure they are attractive, informative and represent the high ambitions we have for children and young people in care
- Target the employees of the Council's key 'neighbours' on the Cobalt Business Park and large employers within the Borough with awareness raising literature;
- Attend an increased number of key community, Borough and regional events such as the Mouth of Tyne Festival with awareness raising 'stalls';
- Produce video stories related to the role and experience of our Foster Carers and care-experienced young people to raise awareness. These videos will be shared on the North Tyneside Council website, social media channels and used at information evenings;
- Improve the Fostering Service web-content on the North Tyneside Council Website, regularly updating with marketing campaign key messages;
- Launch an Online Expression of Interest Form on the North Tyneside Council website, improving the accessibility of the Fostering Service;
- Increase the responsiveness of the Fostering Service to Expressions of Interest;
- Better understand the experience of the journey of assessment to approval by Foster Carers through the use of interview and survey;
- Evaluate what works and what does not as we go along.

Offer more training to more skilled Carers

The introduction of a Payment for Skills structure means that our training and development offer to our Fostering Community needs to change. This has provided an opportunity to really think through what our offer should be to best equip our Fostering Community to meet the challenges of caring for the children and young people in the Borough who need our care. We have worked closely with our Fostering Community. They have strongly influenced what our offer will be. The result is that our offer will be more frequent, more accessible and cover a broader range of skills. We

will also specifically focus on those within our Fostering Community who are interested in developing and strengthening their skills to care for more complex young people.

We will:

- Continue to maintain a dedicated Training post within the Fostering Service;
- Provide a greater range of times and venues for the delivery of training to our Fostering Community, improving accessibility;
- We will work harder to meet the individual circumstances of Foster Carers to enable them to access training, including the provision of alternative care for a child or young person;
- Broaden the providers of our training, with increased participation from RHELAC, CAMHs, Youth Justice, Education Psychology and others
- Support members of our Fostering Community to complete the Children's and Young Peoples Workforce Social Care Diploma up to Level 5
- Offer a minimum of 8 development sessions per year that can be accessed by our Foster Carers

How we will know if our Plan is working

This Strategy is deliberately ambitious. We know there is a lot to do. We want to:

- Consult more widely and more often
- Pay more and pay differently
- Offer more and better support
- Make the Fostering role more visible and more accessible
- Offer more training to more skilled Carers

Each of these elements of our plan has a range of outputs that can be counted – how many Fostering Support Groups do we have, how often is the Advice Line called, how many likes on our Fostering Service Facebook page – data like this will form a part of our understanding about whether our plan is working and on the right track. However, we will not lose sight of the focus of all our activity, the Aims of the Strategy. The following four questions will be key:

- How many Independent Fostering Agency placements have we used
- How many additional Fostering Households have we recruited
- What percentage of our children in care are placed with our own local Foster Carers
- What percentage of sibling groups have we been able to place together

Of course, our Strategy will not be a success if our Fostering Community – our heroes – does not feel that the difference we are trying to achieve has improved their own experience of the Fostering role. We will be asking them on a regular basis how they think we are doing.

Finally, the success of this Strategy should mean that children and young people have the right care at the right time in the right place with the right carers. This Strategy is all about them. We will be asking our children and young people in care how they think we are doing.