

National Fostering Framework: Briefing Note

1. Introduction

1.1 In many ways, foster care is public care at its best. Foster carers have a beneficial impact upon many of the vulnerable children and young people who are looked after by local authorities. The central aim in establishing a National Fostering Framework is to ensure that the best quality foster care placements are available to all the children and young people who need them in order to reach their full potential and that foster carers are valued, supported and receive excellent training.

1.2 The purpose of this note is to:

- provide background information on work done to date on establishing a National Fostering Framework;
- reinforce the 'case for change', the reasons why a National Fostering Framework is needed;
- describe the programme undertaken in Phase One (2015-16);
- inform key stakeholders about the current position;
- identify the lessons learnt from establishing the National Adoption Service; and
- seek support, in principle, for involvement in creating a National Fostering Framework which is best equipped to address the challenges involved.

1.3 It is intended that the note should be used as the basis for reports or presentations to Cabinets, Scrutiny Committees, Corporate Parenting Boards, Regional Partnership Boards and other key bodies. All key stakeholders are encouraged to draw on it to inform and engage with colleagues who would have an interest in this collective enterprise.

2. Background Information

2.1 For some years, key stakeholders have advocated the need for greater collaboration across all sectors, to address strategically the growing concerns about the overall effectiveness and sustainability of fostering services in Wales. ADSS Cymru, WLGA, AFA Cymru and the Fostering Network were keen to play a part in taking this work forward. A case was prepared which outlined the potential contribution that could be made by developing a national framework for the delivery of fostering services and this was presented to the Welsh Government. The Minister for Health and Social Services endorsed this proposal and provided funding for Phase 1 in 2015-16 and later for Phase 2 in 2016-17. This project became one of the four major work streams within the Welsh Government's work programme to 'Improve outcomes for Children'.

2.2 A Reference Group was set up in 2015, with all the key stakeholders represented. It quickly produced a 'First Thoughts' paper which outlined the case for change, identified how we could achieve better partnership across the different sectors and presented some initial ideas about what could be delivered most effectively at national, regional and local levels. A wide-ranging consultation programme followed which provided opportunities to engage with young people, foster carers in local authorities and the independent sector, staff in local authorities and our public service colleagues. The mechanisms for engagement and consultation included:

- on-line surveys for foster carers and staff in all sectors, with leadership from the Fostering Network and local authorities;
- workshops with young people, provided by Voices from Care;
- an all Wales event for local authority managers, staff and public sector partners leadership for this event was provided by AFA Cymru; and
- attendance at existing forums and meetings, to meet directly with carers and providers

2.3 The outcomes of the work programme for 2015-16, including the messages from the consultation exercises, were brought together in the Phase One Report (Appendix 1). The case for change was almost universally acknowledged and there was a strong consensus about creating a National Fostering Framework. This reflected both the scale of people's concerns and also the need to support effective change, tackling some major challenges which can only be addressed at a strategic level. There emerged a wealth of ideas, views and opinions emerged about what a National Fostering Framework should look like and its likely components: increased co-ordination; more sector led improvements; a means of measuring, monitoring and improving performance and resource management; greater accountability; and a search for economies of scale where appropriate. It was seen as a means of ensuring that known concerns are addressed and of introducing greater consistency without sacrificing the acknowledged strengths and diversity of local accountability within the current system.

2.4 Above all, it was acknowledged that a National Fostering Framework is a means to an end and that its aims should be:

- improvements in permanency planning for children and quality of placement provision;
- a more cogent and compelling and strategic intent in relation to fostering services;
- increased collaboration and co-operation by all key stakeholders
- greater transparency about performance of fostering services and efficient use of resources;
- economies of scale, where appropriate, but with a respect for localism;
- more shared services in planning and commissioning;
- consistent use of 'Best Practice' models for recruiting and supporting foster carers; and
- closer links to research and evaluation.

3. The Case For Change

3.1 The work undertaken so far has overwhelmingly identified the need for urgent solutions to:

- growing concerns about the overall effectiveness and sustainability of fostering services in Wales;
- placement pressures and our current inability to consistently match needs and placement options to a good enough standard; and
- difficulties in recruiting foster carers and providing them with the range of skills and support needed for the complex and challenging work they undertake.

3.2 Significant investment of resources and staff time in each local authority has achieved some real improvements in some areas. However, this progress was not reflected in the overall national picture. The opportunities presented by the National Fostering Framework will help to promote cross-authority learning and to raise standards across all authorities.

3.3 In 2015, research published by the Fostering Network identified the need for an additional 550 foster care families in Wales. Over recent years, the total number of general foster placements across the whole of Wales has declined. The table below shows that the number of approved local authority foster carers was lower in March 2015 than it was in March 2012.

| Number of approved local authority foster parents | Year ending |
|---|-------------|
| 2,514 | March 2015 |
| 2,596 | March 2014 |
| 2,553 | March 2013 |
| 2,524 | March 2012 |

3.4 Given that the average age of a foster carer in Wales is fifty-five, we will need to recruit more carers just to stand still. There are many very positive initiatives and innovative ways of working by dedicated and committed staff groups in terms of recruitment, retention and support but they do not appear to be sustained or get picked up uniformly across Wales.

3.5 The work on performance and resourcing undertaken in Phase One work programme identified that our sources of information on fostering services are fragmented and sometimes difficult to access. The need to gather more performance information in relation to each local authority and to understand better the picture across Wales is recognised. Currently, every local authority has its own unique mechanism for collecting information about the performance of its

fostering service. The information they provide to Welsh Government annually, made available on the Stats Wales website, is more consistent. However, it has limited value in performance management terms.¹ The proposed National Performance Framework would enable detailed information to be gathered consistently for each local authority and nationally.

3.6 The number of children looked after by local authority foster carers and by independent sector foster carers has not changed significantly over the last three years. We know the cost of these placements across both sectors. The table below indicates the comparative expenditure between the cost and number of local authority placements and those in the independent sector.

All Wales gross expenditure for fostering services, excluding kinship foster care.

| | 2012/13 | | 2013/14 | | 2014/15 | |
|--|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Local authority foster care | £49,382,143 | 2,230 children | £46,566,444 | 2,240 children | £51,320,559 | 2,200 children |
| Foster care provision from the independent sector | £58,967,864 | 1,300 children | £58,470,061 | 1,275 children | £52,271,037 | 1,205 children |

3.7 The cost per place of the foster placements in the independent sector appears to be double that of local authorities. Moreover, at the end of March 2015, 1,040 children were living in foster placements outside their local authority area; 710 of these placements were provided by an independent fostering agency. In summary, it looks as though the independent sector provides far more expensive placements, further away from a child's community and with all the potential problems associated with greater isolation - limited family contact, reduced oversight and difficulties in securing support from other agencies. There is no indication that this picture will alter significantly unless a more co-ordinated strategic intent is in place. The third sector

¹ Later in September, the Steering Group will undertake some further analysis of this data for the year 2015-16 to help each local authority understand their performance on a comparative basis.

fostering agencies have expressed a strong desire to develop stronger collaborative relationships with the local authorities that are distinct from the commercial sector.

3.8 The work during Phase One identified what we currently know about the performance of our fostering services but also some of the key information gaps.

- How many enquiries do we receive each year from people interested in becoming foster carers?
- How many foster carers are recruited each year?
- How many recruitment campaigns are held each year and what were the outcomes?
- How many foster carers had vacancies and were waiting for a child to be placed with them?
- How many enquiries to foster are received by the independent sector?
- How much do we spend on fostering fees and allowances?

3.9 Development of a national performance framework would provide us with opportunities to:

- have a consistent approach for collating a set of performance and resource management information;
- have access to performance and resource management information for benchmarking and improving fostering services;
- have a set of performance and resource management information that supports the evidence requirements for CSSIW inspections of Fostering Services;
- manage fostering services within a clear financial framework;
- understand what works best in the marketing and recruitment of foster carers;
- demonstrate improvements and raise standards nationally and locally.

4. Learning from other Regional and National Initiatives

4.1 Development of a National Fostering Framework takes place within the wider context of other services which are being remodelled within an approach that has greater national and regional elements. It is important that, while we benefit from the opportunities to deliver some fostering services on a national and regional level, we do not lose the advantages of localism and local accountability. There is an almost unanimous view that the statutory responsibility for children should remain within individual local authorities.

4.2 Some regional initiatives have taken place in recent years and again it will be important to draw on these examples. The South East Improvement Collaborative (SEWIC) have worked on development of a 'best practice model' in the recruitment of foster carers and some preparatory work on harmonisation of fees and allowances. North Wales has plans to deliver some elements of their fostering service on a regional basis: a consistent policy framework for

‘When I’m Ready’; harmonisation of fees and allowances; and better marketing of fostering services. In addition to these more formal approaches, there are a number of local examples of collaborative working between local authorities, most notably around training and Foster Panels.

- 4.3 The development of a National Fostering Framework will benefit from the experience and learning that can be gained from other national initiatives, such as the national approach for children’s advocacy Service and the National Adoption Service (NAS). The NAS has recently published its second Annual Report and so it is an opportune time to identify some of the headline benefits:
- an ability to see consistent performance information, nationally and regionally, which facilitates analysis of performance and making valid comparisons;
 - well-evidenced improvements in performance and greater clarity about areas where performance and service development is needed;
 - higher public profile and a recognisable brand for marketing purposes;
 - a mechanism in place for creating a coherent marketing strategy at all levels;
 - improved engagement with service users and opportunities for greater use of co- production methods in designing services;
 - greater accountability, ownership and interest;
 - the ability of local; government to provide leadership of a major change programme; and
 - a unified approach to improvement, with contributions from a wide range of local authority, 3rd sector and key partners.

It is equally important that we learn from what could have been done differently, with the benefit of hindsight:

- recognising that there is no “magic wand” and that collaboration is hard work requiring an investment of time, patience and persistence at many levels;
- identifying at an earlier stage the challenges around the resources required to set up the central team and the regional elements of the national service;
- the need for more capacity, to undertake the detailed work required around the governance arrangements; and
- the ability to marshal and direct some of the resources has to be shared.

5. The Work Programme for 2016-17

- 5.1 The Phase One Report 2015-16 has been produced, widely distributed to all key stakeholders, presented to the Welsh Government and its Strategic Steering Group to ‘Improve Outcomes for Children’ and discussed by relevant Cabinet Members via the WLGA . Welsh Government endorsed the work programme for Phase Two (2016-17) and approved a further grant. A real

momentum for change is building and it is important that these opportunities receive a positive response.

5.2A Strategic Steering Group has been established, with representation from Welsh Government, the WLGA, ADSS Cymru, the Fostering Network, AFA Cymru, Voices from Care, a Designated Doctor for Looked After Children, CAMHS, Education, the 4Cs and Cascade. This group provides strategic oversight and direction. Implementation of all of the recommendations is seen as being thought to be a two- to three-year work programme.

5.3 The work programme for 2016-17 includes:

- develop an agreed framework for allocating responsibilities at a national, regional and local authority levels and begin work on putting the appropriate structures in place;
- develop a National Performance and Resource Framework to provide greater transparency about the performance of each local authority's fostering service and the efficient use of resources;
- establishing a Welsh identity for local authority Foster Care, a national approach to marketing and use of social media for recruitment and retention;
- achieve greater consistency in the use of Kinship Foster Care;
- developing national arrangements for commissioning all placements, regardless of sector and building on the work of the 4Cs; and
- benchmarking best practice in Corporate Parenting across Councils and other public services, to improve outcomes for children and increase the resilience of foster placements

5.4A variety of methods is being used to take forward these proposals: working groups, workshops, national conferences, production of videos of young people talking of their experience of foster care; etc. Progress reports are produced on a regular basis to the Strategic Steering Group.

6. Recommendations

6.1A clear consensus has emerged that further progress depends upon Wales developing a far more cogent and compelling strategic intent in relation to fostering services, to address growing concerns about their overall effectiveness and sustainability. Continuation of the status quo is likely to be characterised by managed decline, especially when the operational and financial context for looked after children services as a whole is likely to be so challenging for the foreseeable future.

6.2 It is recommended that the principle of establishing a National Fostering Framework is accepted with more detailed reports on each of the recommendations being presented to all key decision makers and policy makers for consideration in due course.