



CABINET REPORT

Date Written	January 2021
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Service Area	Children's Services
Committee Division	Cabinet
Exempt/Non Exempt	Non exempt
Committee Date	24 th March 2021

To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

National Fostering Framework - Regional Working

1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

1.1 This report provides Cabinet with information regarding the proposal to align fostering recruitment across RCT, Merthyr Tydfil and Bridgend to create a Cwm Taf Morgannwg Regional front door for Fostering Services in order to handle all fostering recruitment enquiries, process applications, co-ordinate the marketing function and support potential foster carers through the process of becoming a foster carer.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION that

2.1 Cabinet note the information contained within this report and the commencement of specific proposals to work collaboratively with Bridgend CBC to extend the current regional front door for fostering recruitment across the whole Cwm Taf Morgannwg region be approved.

3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

3.1 The challenges facing fostering services nationally and the case for change are well documented through the National Fostering Framework (NFF) 'First Thoughts' paper and Phase One and Two Reports. These can be summarised as:

- 'growing concerns about the overall effectiveness and sustainability of fostering services in Wales;
- placement pressures and our current inability to match needs and placement options well enough; and

- difficulties in recruiting foster carers and in providing them with the range of skills and support needed for the complex and challenging work they undertake.’ (National Fostering Framework, 2016, p.3).
- 3.2 The NFF phase 3 report sets out the first stage principles of regional working within its 8 work-streams. The streams we want to focus on in this report are:
- Work-stream 2: Development of Regional Work programmes based on regional priorities identified by the national performance framework.
 - Workstream 4: Create an All Wales brand for local authority fostering. Establish a marketing strategy at regional and central level for the brand.
 - Workstream 5: Increase capacity within the regions to respond to additional enquiries following the marketing activity.
- 3.3 All three Local Authorities have experienced difficulties in the recruitment of foster carers. Each year foster carers are lost to each authority due to retirement, sickness, change of career, transfer to Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) and other life events. It is not only necessary to ensure that these numbers are replaced in order to meet the demand we have currently, but also that year on year we increase the number of Local Authority foster carers in Cwm Taf Morgannwg in order to meet the future demands of children who are Looked After.
- 3.4 A lack of Local Authority foster carers can lead to an increased use of Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements at additional costs to the Council. The placements offered by the independent agencies are also more likely to be out of county which creates additional pressures, complexity and costs in relation to staff time and expenses.
- 3.5 The learning from the experiences of IFA’s on the success they have had in recruiting foster carers demonstrates the importance of a responsive customer focused approach when recruiting foster carers. Evidence suggests that prospective foster carers are more likely to choose to apply to an agency if they receive a prompt and timely response, hence the need for a dedicated recruitment resource and a comprehensive customer focused approach at our front door. The learning from these organisations also suggests that a dedicated marketing specialist is essential to coordinate the marketing function.
- 3.6 At present advertising, marketing and enquiries are managed in the following ways:

RCT and Merthyr Tydfil

From 1st April 2019, RCTCBC and MTCBC have been working in collaboration to operate a Regional Front Door for fostering recruitment. The team consists of a Regional Development Manager, Regional Recruitment Officer and Regional Communications and Marketing Officer. The recruitment team facilitates all enquiries, recruitment visits, marketing activity and initial visits up to the point of assessment. Once at the point of assessment the applicant is transferred over to the Team manager responsible for fostering assessments in each LA. The enquirer will contact the service via phone, email, web enquiry or online chat. If necessary, a return phone call is completed within 24 hours and an initial visit (pre-assessment

screening) takes place within 5 working days of initial enquiry. Following a positive Initial Visit, assessments need to be allocated within 10 working days.

The following timescales are in place for responses to enquiries:

- Initial enquiry - follow up call within 24 hours.
- Initial Visit - within 5 Days of the initial enquiry or at a time convenient to the applicant.
- Preparation Training - runs every 1-2 months on a regional basis (keeping in touch processes and early assessment work plans are in place whilst this is arranged.
- Assessment - Completion 4 to 6 months from commencing assessment.

The Regional Recruitment Officer coordinates all recruitment activity including maintaining databases and systems, making recruitment calls, completion of IV's and processing application forms. They also coordinate the regional skills to foster preapproval training.

The Regional Marketing Officer coordinates all marketing activity in relation to fostering, including the development of a comprehensive marketing strategy for each LA, the development of materials, content and case studies, maintaining and facilitating each LA's fostering Facebook pages, maintenance and updating of the regional fostering website and linking in with national priorities.

Bridgend

BCBC currently have a vacant post for a full-time development officer with responsibility for some recruitment and marketing activity, including the development of a recruitment strategy.

In addition, the service has a shared marketing resource in the form of a staff member within the corporate communications department. However, this post is not dedicated to fostering and facilitates a portfolio of marketing activity for several departments within the LA.

The service handles enquiries through the following means:

Initial enquiry received via email

The current Development officer will contact the applicant and complete initial contact form (Screening).

If the contact is positive and the applicant wants to proceed this is forwarded to a social worker to complete the initial visit.

Initial enquiry by phone/ in person

Whoever receives the contact within the team will complete the initial contact form, if they are a social worker, they will also arrange the initial visit during this call.

Where possible, assessments are allocated to in-house social workers for completion.

3.7 Merthyr Tydfil Recruitment Data

Year	Enquiries	Initial Visits		Assessments Allocated	
		Number	% of enquiries	Number	% of enquiries
2018-19	21	15	75%	4	20%
2019-20	23	15	65.2%	8	34.8%
2020/21 (to 31/01/21 only)	19	13	68.4%	7	46.8%

3.8 RCT Recruitment Data

Year	Enquiries	Initial Visits		Assessments Allocated	
		Number	% of enquiries	Number	% of enquiries
2018-19	146	24	16.4%	17	11.6%
2019-20	143	40	30%	25	17.5%
2020/21 (to 31/01/21 only)	113	46	40.7%	20	17.7%

3.9 Bridgend Recruitment Data

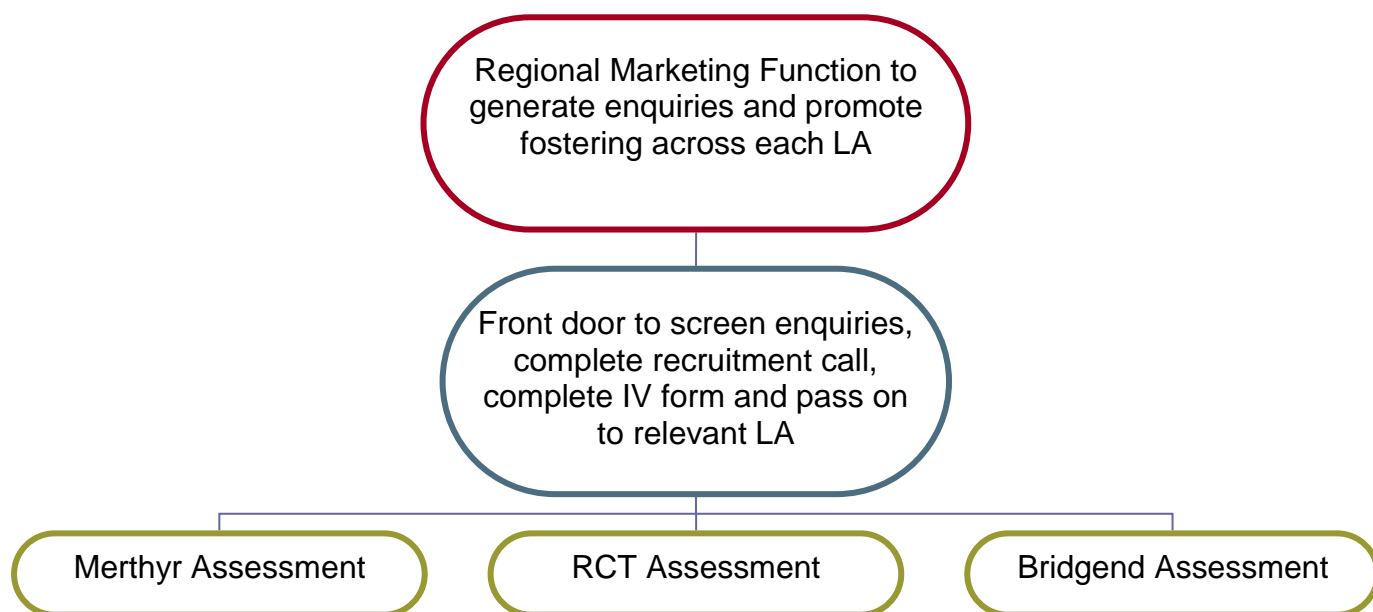
Year	Enquiries	Initial Visits		Assessments Allocated	
		Number	% of enquiries	Number	% of enquiries
2018-19	91	30	33.3%	14	15.5%
2019-20	142	49	34.5%	14	9.8%
2020/21 (to 31/01/21 only)					

3.10 Timescales for current Cwm Taf Regional Front Door provision

	Follow up Call	Initial Visit	Allocated Assessment
2020/21	1 day	4.9 days	30.1 days
2019/20	1 day	11.9 days	55.1 days
2018/19	4.8 days	35 days	66.2 days

3.11 We can see that in RCT and Merthyr, where a regional front door team has been in place since April 2019, whilst enquiries have stayed largely the same, the numbers proceeding into IV and onto full assessment have increased substantially. This can be attributed to both a dedicated resource at the front door handling enquiries in a prompt and professional manner and the specific content, developed by the Regional Marketing Officer, available through the regional fostering website and social media platforms, allowing people to have all the information available prior to taking the first step of enquiring to become a foster carer.

- 3.12 The table in 3.10 shows the impact that having a dedicated resource at the front door has on reducing timescales between enquiry and allocation of assessment, therefore reducing the risk of applicants going to other agencies. By providing a dedicated, responsive service we can ensure that all applicants have the opportunity to progress into assessment as quickly as possible, whilst still gathering all the information needed to make informed decisions on whether or not applicants are suitable for fostering.
- 3.13 By further investing in the area of marketing and recruitment and bringing these front door functions together, on a collaborative (and providing dedicated staff to the role of recruitment and marketing), this will continue to improve the amount of people hearing the message of fostering for your Local Authority, the responsiveness towards enquiries, completing IV pre assessment screening within an appropriate time and the amount of applicants reaching assessment and therefore resulting in an increase in the amount of approved foster carers. This will lead to a greater availability of local authority foster placements, better matching and less reliance on expensive IFA placements. Shared resources and ideas will represent better value for money, an opportunity for regional recruitment campaigns and provide a much-improved service.
- 3.14 A range of options were considered by the regional strategic group and an options paper was developed before it was decided that the preferred option was a complete collaboration involving the existing regional front door team completing the marketing and recruitment for BCBC in addition to RCT and Merthyr Tydfil. The process will work as follows:



- 3.15 There is a dedicated implementation plan to follow before the regional front door launch in April 2021 and the arrangements for the collaboration are as follows:
- RCT CBC will remain the employer of the Regional Marketing Officer, who will have the responsibility for fostering marketing for all three LA's, including the development of a recruitment and marketing strategy, implementing local and regional recruitment campaigns, developing content for the websites and social

media channels and leading on national recruitment and marketing priorities. Some corporate support will still be necessary with regards to marketing, including posting content on the Council's main social media channels and website and website development.

- Merthyr Tydfil CBC will remain the employer of the Regional Recruitment Officer who will have the responsibility for fostering recruitment across all three LA's, including organising recruitment events, handling initial enquiries, completion of IV's and recommendations, processing of application forms and being the point of contact up to the point of assessment.
- The team will be managed by the Regional Development Manager for Fostering Services.
- Any phone calls will be directed through a dedicated phone line in the RCT Contact Centre and web enquiries sent directly to the recruitment team through RCT's CRM system.
- Funding for the project has been identified through existing budgets and an apportioned cost has been agreed between the Authorities.
- An allocation protocol has been agreed so that Merthyr Tydfil residents would be referred to Merthyr Tydfil fostering services, this agreement also considers those living outside Merthyr Tydfil and carers personal choice.
- Each local authority would retain its own brand identity so that we can ensure a local fostering identity remains. The Recruitment Officer would visit either on behalf of BCBC or on behalf of RCTCBC or on behalf of MTCBC and not as Cwm Taf Morgannwg, however some regional collaboration on marketing activity would be of benefit to all 3 LA's.
- A memorandum of understanding is being developed, setting out the responsibilities of each LA.

3.16 Implementing these recommendations will strengthen the aim to increase the pool of local authority foster carers by increasing the number of enquiries received from the public about becoming a foster carer. It is also envisaged that by focusing on this area improvements will also be made in the conversion rate from those who initially enquire going through to a full assessment (the more enquires you have the more assessments that can be completed).

3.17 This will therefore create more local authority foster placements which will result in better matching, less reliance on Independent Foster Agencies (IFA's), provide better value for money and improve outcomes for children looked after.

4.0 SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

4.1 Strengths:

- Enables marketing expertise and marketing resource dedicated to fostering in all 3 LA's at fostering service level.
- Would enable a speedy, consistent and robust response to enquiries across the region.
- Responsive of current service has been effective so far in Merthyr Tydfil and RCT (similar model).
- Alignment of recruitment processes across the region.
- Cost saving from current practice for each LA (more for less).
- Avoids duplication of work across the region.

- Would lay the ground for Foster Wales and provide a coordinated link with national priorities across the region.
- Would enable regional marketing campaigns to take place, pooling resources to have a stronger impact across the local area.
- Campaigns that haven't been viable locally due to finance could take place regionally.
- Future funding may be available through NFF/Foster Wales to adopt this approach, CTM would be a step ahead.
- Sustain links and sharing of good practice between all 3 LA's.
- Common aim and shared agreement between all 3 LA's means consistency and strengthens LA voice over IFA's.
- Local marketing strategies can be aligned, whilst maintaining individuality.
- Fully in line with Foster Wales ethos of shared marketing resource across whole of region.
- Increase the rate of legitimate enquiries and in turn increase the number of foster carers being approved.
- More opportunities to market and build improved brand image locally.
- Data collection anticipated to better inform planning and marketing.
- As more Local Authority carers are recruited, there will be less reliance on expensive IFA placements and therefore a financial saving for the authority.

4.2 Areas for Development:

- Aligned processes between front door and three separate assessment and support teams.
- Linking in with development of Foster Wales.
- Development and decisions about alignment of allowances and payments which currently differ in fees and allowances between both local authorities.
- Potential for development of regional foster panel and pre-approval training.
- Work needs to continue to develop Kinship care as this will still impact availability and capacity of staff to assess and support generic foster carers and placements.
- Robust and regular regional meetings between LA's need to be re-established to ensure the project is a success and a partnership approach is adopted.

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 This proposal sets out to deliver improvements by implementing this collaborative project within current budgets. At this stage, no additional funding will be required.

5.2 The financial contributions from each LA are outlined below:

Resource (and annual financial contribution apportionment basis)	2020/2021 Total Cost	2020/2021 Annual Cost Apportionment		
		RCT CBC	MTCBC	BCBC
1 x Gr5 Recruitment officer (apportioned based on No. of enquires 19/20)	£32,178	<u>£15,091</u>	<u>£3,057</u>	<u>£14,030</u>
1 x Gr9 Marketing Officer (apportioned equally between the Authorities)	£38,858	<u>£12,953</u>	<u>£12,952</u>	<u>£12,953</u>
Contact Centre (Call Handling) (apportioned based on No. of enquires 19/20)	£2,500	<u>£1,170</u>	<u>£240</u>	<u>£1,090</u>
Total Contribution	£73,536	<u>£29,214</u>	<u>£16,249</u>	<u>£28,073</u>

- 5.3 It is proposed that any shared costs such as ICT and Regional Marketing costs will be shared equally between each Local Authority.
- 5.4 It is proposed that any direct costs associated with recruitment, retention and marketing activity on a local level (ie. relating to local authorities own schemes) will be funded by each respective Local Authority.
- 5.5 A memorandum of understanding is being developed between the three local authorities to formalise arrangements, including financial implications and governance of the project.

6.0 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

6.1	Positive Impacts	Negative Impacts	Not Applicable
1. Merthyr Tydfil Well-being Objectives	3 of 4	0 of 4	1 of 4
2. Sustainable Development Principles - How have you considered the five ways of working: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long term • Prevention • Integration • Collaboration • Involvement 	5 of 5	0 of 5	0 of 5
3. Protected Characteristics <i>(including Welsh Language)</i>	10 of 10	0 of 10	0 of 10
4. Biodiversity	0 of 1	0 of 1	1 of 1
<p><u>Summary:</u></p> <p>The main positive impacts will lead to long term improvements, with the overall aim of empowering the local community to become foster carers. This will support longer term sufficiency of placements to best match our young people's needs.</p> <p>No negative impacts have been identified.</p>			

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MEMBER FOR SOCIAL SERVICES

BACKGROUND PAPERS		
Title of Document(s)	Document(s) Date	Document Location
Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?		No

Consultation has been undertaken with the Corporate Management Team in respect of each proposal(s) and recommendation(s) set out in this report.