

# BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

## REPORT TO CABINET

9 MARCH 2021

### REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR SOCIAL SERVICES & WELLBEING REGIONAL FRONT DOOR FOR FOSTERING RECRUITMENT - CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

#### 1. Purpose of report

1.1 The purpose of this report is to:

- Request approval to align fostering recruitment across Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil through the creation of a Cwm Taf Morgannwg (CTM) Regional 'front door' to potential foster carers. The 'front door' will effectively support all: fostering recruitment enquiries, processing applications, co-ordinating the marketing function and supporting potential foster carers through the process of becoming a foster carer.
- Seek authorisation to delegate authority to the Head of Children's Social Care to represent Bridgend County Borough Council on the Regional Strategic Group, which will provide governance for, and make decisions in relation to, the implementation of the regional fostering service functions set out in this report.

#### 2. Connection to corporate well-being objectives / other corporate priorities

2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate well-being objectives under the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**:-

- **Supporting a successful sustainable economy** – taking steps to make the county borough a great place to do business, for people to live, work, study and visit, and to ensure that our schools are focused on raising the skills, qualifications and ambitions for all people in the county borough.
- **Helping people and communities to be more healthy and resilient** - taking steps to reduce or prevent people from becoming vulnerable or dependent on the Council and its services. Supporting individuals and communities to build resilience, and enable them to develop solutions to have active, healthy and independent lives.
- **Smarter use of resources** – ensure that all resources (financial, physical, ecological, human and technological) are used as effectively and efficiently as possible and support the creation of

resources throughout the community that can help to deliver the Council's well-being objectives.

### **3. Background**

- 3.1 Supporting people to become foster carers is critical to the provision of the right substitute family care for children who are looked after. The challenges facing fostering services nationally, and the case for change, have been well documented through the National Fostering Framework (NFF) 'First Thoughts' paper and phase one and two reports. These challenges can be summarised as:
- 'growing concerns about the overall effectiveness and sustainability of fostering services in Wales;
  - pressures in the care system and challenges in matching needs and through sufficiency and range of foster care options; 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 principles for regional working within its 8 work-streams. The streams this report focused on are:
- Work-stream 2: Development of regional work programmes based on priorities aligned with the national performance framework.
  - Work-stream 4: Create an all Wales brand for local authority fostering and establish a marketing strategy at regional and central level for the brand.
  - Work-stream 5: Increase capacity within the regions to respond to additional enquiries following the marketing activity.
- 3.3 All three Cwm Taf Morgannwg Local Authorities have experienced difficulties in the recruitment of foster carers. Each year there is attrition due to retirement, sickness, change of career, transfer to Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) and other life events. It is necessary to ensure sufficient numbers and a range of skills and experience in the foster carer population in order to provide the right homes to meet current and future needs of children looked after.
- 3.4 Insufficient numbers of Local Authority foster carers can lead to an increased use of Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) carers at additional costs to the Council. The homes offered by the independent agencies are also more likely to be out of county which creates additional pressures and can mean poorer outcomes for children and young people as they can lose connections with local schools and wider family and community.
- 3.5 The learning from IFAs on successful foster carer recruitment demonstrates the importance of a responsive customer focused approach. 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 culture at a front door which specialises in foster carer recruitment. The learning from these

organisations also suggests that a dedicated marketing specialist is essential to provide expertise in promoting foster care opportunities to the widest ranges of potential foster families.

- 3.6 At present advertising, marketing and enquiries are managed in the following ways:

### **Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCTCBC) and Merthyr Tydfil (MTCBC)**

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. At the point of assessment the applicant is transferred over to the fostering team manager in the individual local authority. The enquirer will contact the service via phone, email, web enquiry or online chat. If required, 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 working 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 initial visits and processing application forms. They also coordinate the regional skills to foster pre-approval training.

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

### **Bridgend (BCBC)**

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 local authority.

The service handles enquiries through the following means:

### **Initial enquiry received via email**

The 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 **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)	88	35	39.8%	22	25%

## 3.8 **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%

### 3.9 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%

### 3.10 Timescales for current Cwm Taf Regional Front Door provision

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

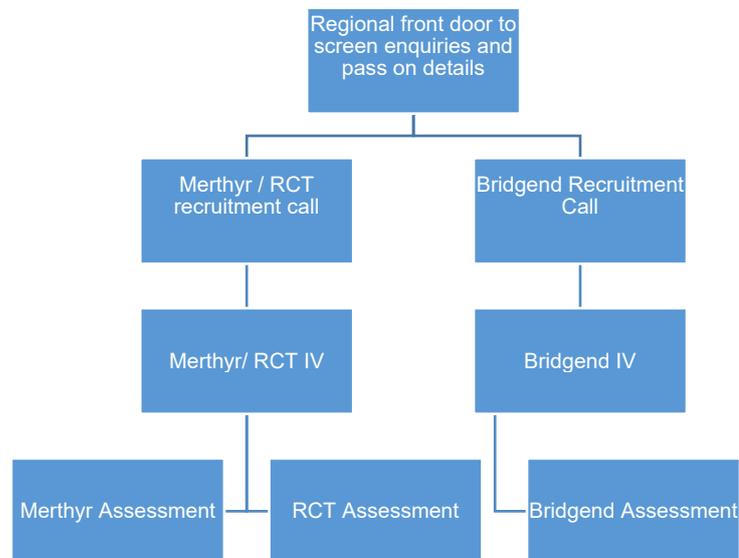
- 3.11 Improved performance is evidenced in the Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil regional front door. This can be attributed to both a dedicated resource at the front door handling enquiries in a prompt and professional manner and the specific content, developed by the Regional Marketing Officer, 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 basis (and providing dedicated staff to the role of recruitment and marketing), this will replicate good practice in independent agencies, improve the responsiveness towards enquiries, completing initial visit pre assessment screening within an appropriate time and the number of applicants reaching assessment. It is anticipated this will result in an increase in the number of approved foster carers. This will lead to a greater availability of local authority foster families, better matching and less reliance on expensive IFA carers and therefore better outcomes for children and young people. Shared resources and ideas will represent better value for

money, an opportunity for regional recruitment campaigns and provide a much-improved service.

#### 4. Current situation/proposal

4.1 A range of options have been considered by the regional strategic group. These can be outlined as follows:

- Option 1- Regional Phone line



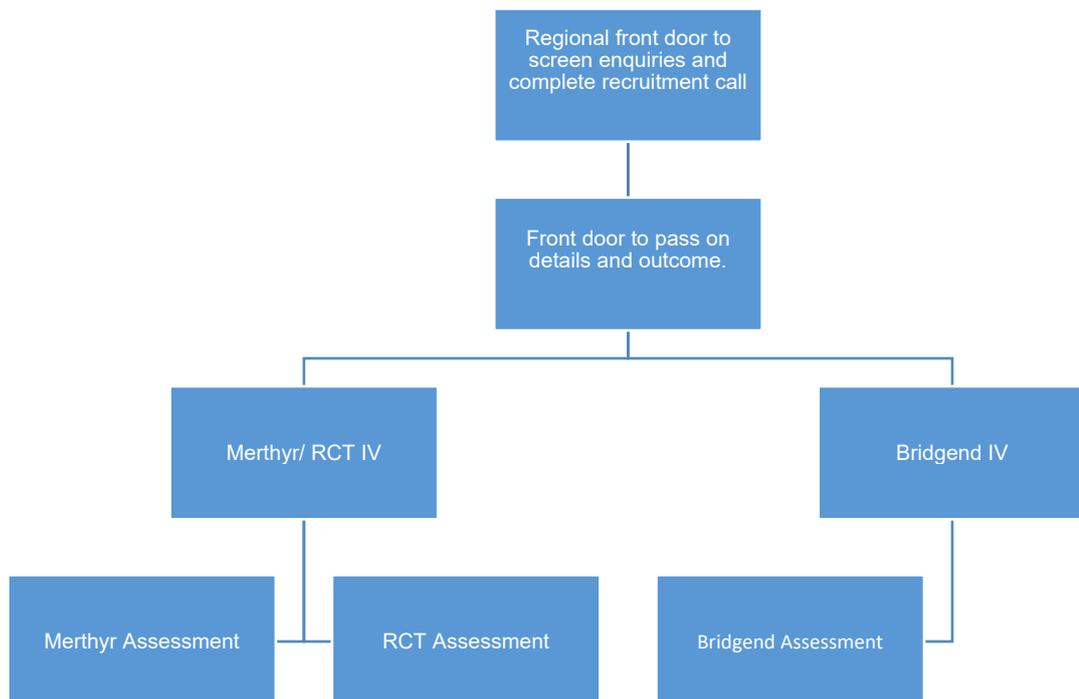
#### Strengths:

- Allows for central point of contact for all 3 Local Authorities (LAs), would allow for regional marketing campaigns (same recruitment number/ email address to contact).
- Would add resilience to handle initial phone calls and emails for BCBC.
- Promotes shared agreement for those living in each LA and enquiring. Ensures they go forward for their own LA.
- Can be facilitated within existing resources.

#### Weaknesses:

- Does not solve capacity issues for processing enquiries and completing recruitment calls/initial visits.
- Does not allow for marketing expertise within BCBC fostering.
- Response may be delayed for BCBC applicants if waiting on a call back due to time allowed for information to be passed on.
- Does not align recruitment processes in all 3 LAs.
- Local marketing strategies may remain independent from each other.

- Option 2 – Regional Recruitment Calls



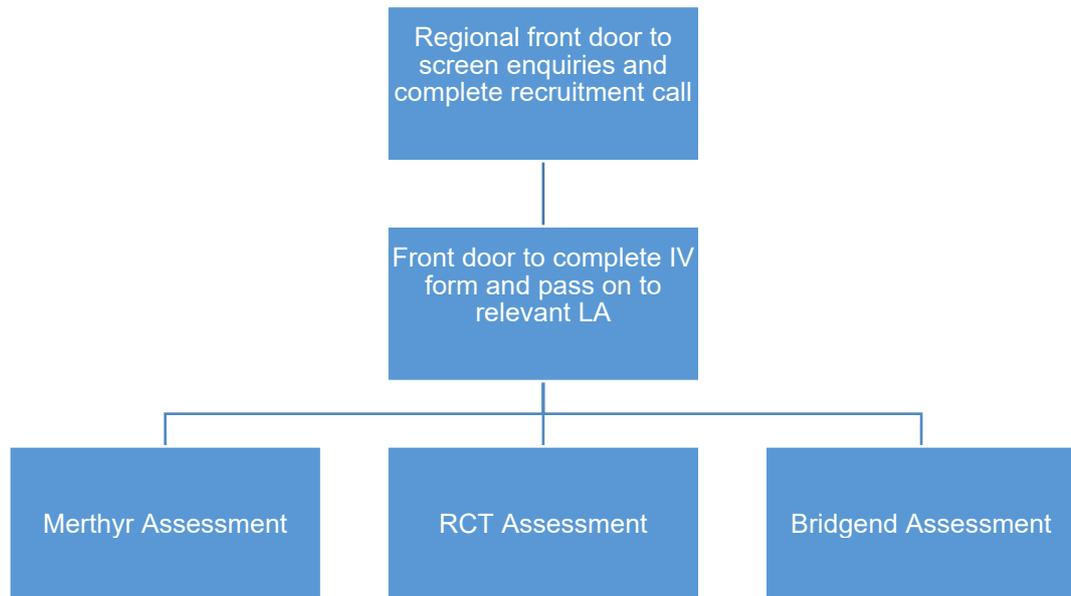
### Strengths

- Allows for central point of contact for all 3 LAs, would allow for regional marketing campaigns.
- Would add resilience to handle initial phone calls and emails for BCBC.
- Promotes shared agreement for those living in each LA and enquiring. Ensures they go forward for their own LA.
- Can be facilitated within existing resources.

### Weaknesses

- Lack of consistency for applicant in terms of point of contact.
- Does not solve capacity issues for processing enquiries and completing IVs.
- Does not allow for marketing expertise within BCBC fostering.
- Response may be delayed for BCBC applicants from recruitment call to IV due to time taken for information to be passed on.
- Does not align recruitment processes in all 3 LAs.
- Local marketing strategies may remain independent from each other.

- Option 3 – Regional Pre Assessment process



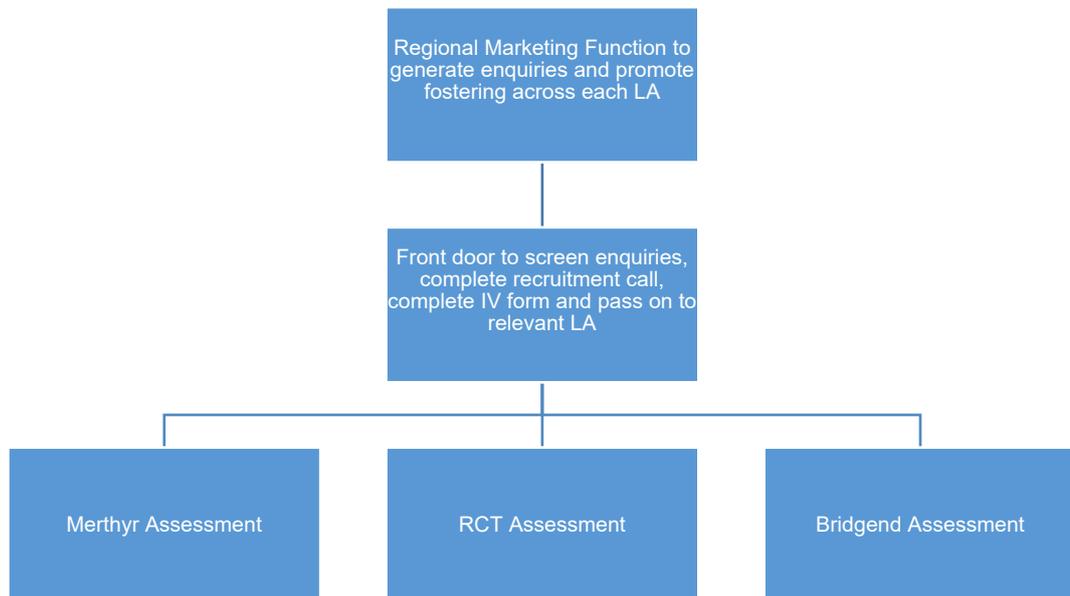
Strengths:

- Allows for central point of contact for all 3 LAs, would allow for regional marketing campaigns.
- Would add resilience to handle initial phone calls and emails for BCBC.
- Promotes shared agreement for those living in each LA and enquiring. Ensures they go forward for their own LA.
- Can be facilitated within existing resources.
- Aligns recruitment processes in all 3 LAs.
- Consistency of point of contact up to the point of assessment.
- Allows for strict monitoring of timescales between enquiry and IV.
- Frees up capacity for Supervising Social Workers to concentrate on Assessments and Support.

Weaknesses:

- Does not allow for marketing expertise within BCBC fostering.
- Local marketing strategies may remain independent from each other.
- Does not include central point of contact for Foster Wales on a regional level to link in with national picture.
- Adoption of recruitment posts would need to be considered as to which LAs they were based in and processes for line management of staff, ICT equipment etc established.
- Recruitment processes are currently different within Bridgend and all LAs processes may need to be adapted/ changed to ensure consistency across the service.
- If enquiries increase will need additional capacity for recruitment at the front door to avoid delay ( minimum 0.5 FTE post)

- Option 4 – Regional Front Door for Fostering recruitment



### Strengths

- Enables marketing expertise and marketing resource dedicated to fostering in all 3 LAs at fostering service level.
- Would enable a speedy, consistent and robust response to enquiries across the region.
- Responsiveness of current service has been effective so far in Merthyr and RCT (similar model).
- Alignment of recruitment processes across the region.
- Cost saving from current practice for each LA based on 2020/21 budgets (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 have not been viable locally due to finance could take place regionally.
- Regional website would reflect new regional footprint and contain details and case studies from all 3 LAs.
- 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 LAs.
- Common aim and shared agreement between all 3 LAs means consistency and strengthens LA voice over IFAs.
- Local marketing strategies can be aligned, whilst maintaining individuality.

- Fully in line with Foster Wales ethos of shared marketing resource across whole of region.

### Weaknesses

- Adoption of recruitment posts would need to be considered as to which LAs they were based in and processes for line management of staff, ICT equipment etc established.
- Recruitment processes are currently different within Bridgend and all LAs processes may need to be adapted/ changed to ensure consistency across the service.
- Requires financial contribution from all 3 LAs.
- New digital marketing tools will need to be established (Bridgend Facebook page).
- Timescale to implement may have impact on current recruitment service.
- 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

4.2 The decision reached by the regional strategic board was that option 4 was the preferred model which is in line with the direction of travel set out within the National Fostering Framework. Progressing this option will benefit Bridgend Fostering with social workers able to dedicate more time to support foster carers to contribute to family stability and help to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people.

### 4.3 **Implementation of a Regional Fostering Recruitment Service:**

Subject to approval from Cabinet, a dedicated implementation plan has been drafted which will be followed to achieve the regional front door launch in April 2021 and the arrangements for the collaboration as follows:

- RCTCBC will remain the employer of the Regional Marketing Officer, who will have the responsibility for marketing fostering for all three LAs, 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. Each individual local authority will continue to support marketing, including posting content on the Council's main social media channels and website and website development. There will be no HR implications for Bridgend County Borough Council as we will not be directly employing any members of staff within this service and no current BCBC employees will be at detriment.
- MTCBC will remain the employer of the Regional Recruitment Officer who will have the responsibility for fostering recruitment across all three LAs, including organising recruitment events, handling initial enquiries,

completion of initial visits 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, who is employed by and based in RCTCBC.
- 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 Bridgend residents would be referred to Bridgend fostering services. This agreement also considers those living outside Bridgend 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 LAs.
- The LAs shall enter into a collaboration agreement for this arrangement and one is currently being developed between the parties, setting out the responsibilities of each LA and the pooling of resources.

## **5. Effect upon policy framework and procedure rules**

5.1 There is no effect on the Policy Framework and Procedure Rules.

## **6. Equality Impact Assessment**

6.1 An initial Equality Impact Assessment screening has been undertaken and there are no direct equality implications as a consequence of this report.

## **7. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 implications**

7.1 The implementation of the duties and responsibilities under the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 (SSWBA) in turn, supports the promotion of two of the seven goals of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 within the County Borough of Bridgend. By increasing the pool of local authority foster carers we are helping to give children stable and loving homes within their own communities we are therefore promoting an environment that maximises people's physical and mental well-being and by supporting children, young people, adults and their carers and families to fulfil their potential no matter what their circumstances, the well-being goals of a Healthier and more equal Bridgend and Wales are supported.

7.2 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 provides the basis for driving a different kind of public service in Wales, with five ways of working to guide how the Authority should work to deliver well-being outcomes for people. The following is a summary to show how the five ways of working to achieve the well-being goals have been considered in this report:

- **Long Term** – Social Services is demand led and the SSWBA focuses on sustainable prevention and well-being outcomes for the future. There is a requirement to meet the needs of people in the longer term and, because of rising demographics and increasing complexity, the remodeling and transformation of services continues to be a priority. The Fostering Service promotes secure attachment as a means of helping children and young people and their carers maintain placements (living and educational) so that they can feel safe enough to develop supportive attachments/relationships, and opportunities for positive growth and resilience in the future.
- **Prevention** – Availability of local, well prepared foster carers will help to prevent placement breakdown and keep children within their own communities, preventing issues that arise from out of county moves escalating further. In addition we are seeking to address the decline in fostering households across the region and nationally to prevent a shortfall in fostering placements in the future.
- **Integration** – the implementation of the SSWBA requires local authorities to work with partners, the regional approach to fostering recruitment is the starting point for future collaborative work to further improve Local Authority foster care across the region.
- **Collaboration** –The regional front door for fostering recruitment has been developed and agreed at a regional level in order to increase the pool of local authority foster carers available. Collaborating will help inform and support the region’s vision to provide the best possible opportunity for recruiting more foster carers in order to find stable, loving homes for children looked after. Collaborating will allow the sharing of good practice and the sharing of resource in order to achieve this common goal.
- **Involvement** – the key stakeholders are the people who use social care. There is considerable engagement including surveys, consultation events, feedback forms and the complaints process. The provision of accessible information and advice helps to ensure that the voice of adults, children and young people is heard.

## 8. Financial implications

- 8.1 This proposal sets out to deliver improvements by implementing this collaborative project within current budgets. At this stage, no additional funding will be required over and above existing fostering budgets with BCBC re-aligning money from its in-house fostering budget to a pooled fund to pay for the implementation.
- 8.2 The estimated direct staff cost of the proposed new team is approximately £73,536, of which BCBC will provide £28,073. RCT CBC will provide £29,214 and MTCBC will provide £16,249. This will be reviewed on a regular basis and at least annually.
- 8.3 The costs for the resource requirements relating to the running of the Service shall be apportioned between the Authorities as laid out in the table 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 fostering enquires 2019 / 2020)	£ 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 fostering enquires 2019 / 2020)	£2,500	<u>£1,170</u>	<u>£240</u>	<u>£1,090</u>
Total contribution (see section 2)	£73,536	<u>£29,214</u>	<u>£16,249</u>	<u>£28,073</u>

8.4 It is proposed that any direct costs associated with recruitment, retention and marketing activity on a local level (i.e. relating to local authorities own schemes) will be funded by each respective Local Authority individually, through retaining their existing recruitment and marketing budgets.

8.5 A collaboration agreement is being developed between the three local authorities to formalise arrangements, including financial implications and governance of the project.

## 9. Recommendations

9.1 It is recommended that Cabinet:

- Approves entering into a regional collaboration with RCTCBC and MTCBC for the creation of a Cwm Taf Morgannwg Regional Front Door for Fostering Recruitment which will align fostering recruitment across Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil.
- Delegate authority to the Corporate Director Social Services and Wellbeing in consultation with the Interim Chief Officer – Finance, Performance and Change, and Chief Officer- Legal, HR and Regulatory Services, to agree and approve the terms of the regional collaboration agreement and pooled fund agreement and to arrange execution of the regional collaboration agreement and pooled fund agreement on behalf of the Council.
- Delegate authority to the Head of Children’s Social Care to represent and make decisions for Bridgend County Borough Council on the Strategic Board

- Delegate authority to the Group Manager, Placements and Provider Services and Team Manager, Bridgend Fostering to represent and make decisions for Bridgend County Borough Council on the Operational Board

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**Corporate Director, Social Services and Wellbeing**  
**February 2021**

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**Background documents:**

Business case for a Cwm Taf Morgannwg Collaborative project: Developing a regional service to meet the recruitment, marketing, response to enquiries and assessment of foster carers functions of the Local Authority Fostering Services.