

Meeting of:	CABINET COMMITTEE – CORPORATE PARENTING
Date of Meeting:	5 OCTOBER 2023
Report Title:	FOSTER WALES BRIDGEND UPDATE
Report Owner / Corporate Director:	CORPORATE DIRECTOR – SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING
Responsible Officer:	LAURA KINSEY HEAD OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES
Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	There are no implications for the policy framework and procedure rules.
Executive Summary:	An update on development within Foster Wales Bridgend to meet placement needs. The update includes the outcome of engagement sessions with the fostering and Care Experienced Teams, contextual information regarding placements for care experienced children, an update on general foster carer approvals and numbers of children who have become subject to Special Guardianship Orders. Additional information is provided regarding ongoing recruitment activities and the roll out of Signs of Safety.

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Cabinet Committee - Corporate Parenting with an update on Foster Wales Bridgend Service Developments.

2. Background

- 2.1 As part of the Welsh Government's Programme for Government 2022-2027, there are a number of commitments that taken together describe a new vision to transform children's services. The delivery of these commitments will effect change across the whole care system here in Wales.

- 2.2 A key component of this new vision for children's services is the Programme for Government commitment to remove private profit from the care of care experienced children. Foster Wales was launched in 2021, which enables:

- Shared governance and leadership at national level across all 22 local authorities in Wales
- Investment in local and regional capacity for delivery of services
- A shared approach to National Recruitment Challenges in foster care

- 2.3 Our Vision Statement within Foster Wales Bridgend is:
We aim to ensure that Foster Carers are recognised as professionals whose views are actively sought and considered when decisions are being made about children in their care. Foster Carers will be provided with the right support at the right time to ensure that children and young people in their care achieve the best possible outcomes.

3. Current situation / proposal

- 3.1 The aim of the Programme for Government commitment is to ensure that public money invested in accommodation for care experienced children does not lead to profit, but instead any surpluses are reinvested into children's services to deliver better outcomes, service improvement and further professional development. This means, by 2027, care of children that are looked after in Wales will be provided by public sector, charitable or not-for-profit organisations.
- 3.2 In accordance with the eliminating profit priorities, and to strengthen the therapeutic model and capacity to implement, BCBC submitted an application for, and secured funding, to strengthen residential staffing structures and develop and implement a dedicated support team in fostering and residential services from Welsh Government.
- 3.3 Engagement sessions have been completed with our foster carers, fostering and care experienced teams to both inform the shape of the service and consider how we may build on existing support mechanisms to improve services for foster carers and care experienced children.
- 3.4 Following from these engagement sessions we plan to ensure prospective Kinship Carers, who are supporting children whilst being assessed, have access to a dedicated support worker to provide practical support and guidance. Such support will better enable children to remain within their families and better enable a permanent order to be made at the conclusion of proceedings, where children are unable to return to the care of a parent.
- 3.5 We will also work with our colleagues within Foster Wales and Social Care Workforce Development to create an induction programme for new Foster Carers, to enable our carers to provide Trauma Informed support to children and young people. 57% of Care Experienced Children in BCBC are supported by BCBC Foster Carers at the present time, 107 children being placed with general foster carers and 109 with kinship carers. 12% of children are currently placed with independent fostering providers (45 children) and 19% (72 children) placed with their parents.
- 3.6 It is positive to note that children placed with connected persons has increased steadily over time, with 87 children placed with connected persons in 2020 and rising to 109 currently. Numbers of children placed with independent fostering providers has also decreased from 69 in 2020 to 45 currently.
- 3.7 The number of children looked after has fallen by 4% from 390 at 31st March 2017 to 374 at 31st March 2022. However, latest data as at 18th September 2023 indicates that there are 385 children looked after by Bridgend which is an increase of 3% since March 2022 when there were 374 children looked after.

- 3.8 The area of highest demand (39% of all children looked after) is the age category 10 – 15 years (153 children), which is problematic as there is a national shortage of placements for this cohort. This indicates that there will be high demand for leaving care services as the high levels aged 10-15 move through the care systems for the next 3-6 years. This trend has been visible over the past 2 years and across the Cwm Taff region, and this is therefore likely to continue.
- 3.9 We are in the process of recruiting 2 new posts funded via Foster Wales within the team. One post will support placement finding and matching for children, the other will be a dedicated post to focus on Foster Carer Recruitment.
- 3.10 So far this year we have approved the same number of foster carers, as we did for the whole of last year, 5 carers for 11 children.

Year	Carers	Placements
31/03/19	6	6
31/03/20	8	13
31/03/21	16	22
31/03/22	4	6
31/03/23	5	7

- 3.11 We are currently assessing 2 of our existing Kinship carers to convert to General Fostering and provide additional placements.
- 3.12 16 children have ceased to be looked after so far this year via the granting of Special Guardianship Orders. Our Kinship Team Manager is working with the Association for Fostering, Kinship and Adoption (AFKA) to develop a national transfer protocol for Special Guardians to ensure that they experience consistency of service when they move to another local authority area. Such arrangements will better enable family members to support children under the auspices of Special Guardianship Orders.
- 3.13 Over the past year, Foster Wales has worked with local authorities to enable National Brand Recognition, secured Welsh Government investment, and accessed free media opportunities to further promote fostering recruitment.
- 3.14 Foster Wales are making use of technology to enhance services via the enhancement of the local Foster Wales Websites and development of Apps. Such methods better enable foster carers to access a variety of training, to refer their friends to fostering (the referral scheme will **pay £250** to any carer who has referred an applicant or applicants that are successful in their application) and create profiles about themselves to share with children before they arrive in placements.
- 3.15 Foster Wales Bridgend continue to promote our foster friendly policy, with our Group Manager having delivered a presentation to education colleagues on 14th September 2023 and our Regional Development Officer, presenting to the Public Services Board on 21st September 2023.
- 3.16 Foster Wales have launched a consultation with foster carers taking place on 29th September 2023 about fostering allowances to feedback to Welsh Government. This is a long term workstream aimed at enabling consistency in the offer of support to foster carers across Wales and reduce competition between local authorities.

- 3.17 Foster Wales have also developed forums where those working within fostering to support foster carers can meet to share ideas and resources.
- 3.18 Within Foster Wales Bridgend we have established coffee support groups for general and kinship foster carers, where they are able to hear updates from the team, meet with guest speakers and have an opportunity to access peer support.
- 3.19 The Team have been working to embed Signs of Safety (SofS) into their practice in accordance with the model being rolled out across the local authority, the lead consultant for BCBC recently gave the following feedback:

I was so impressed with the managers efforts to lead and embed the SofS practice and how team members were responding to this. We had lots of examples in how they were practicing the model. It was such a delight to see how committed the teams were to learn, trying the model out and sharing how the model was helping them. I certainly felt that the team/s were the strongest in leading the signs of safety practice! I felt proud and inspired from the team.

- 3.20 Our next Recruitment Campaign to look out for and promote is focused on combatting outdated and damaging perceptions of care experienced teens. We will provide more details in future and extend invitations to cabinet committee to participate.

4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)

- 4.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. This is an information report, therefore it is not necessary to carry out an Equality Impact assessment in the production of this report. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

5. Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives

- 5.1 A summary of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 assessment is listed below:

Long-term Children are supported by their carers to reach their full potential, and carers/staff have access to a highly skilled staff team for advice, support, and direction.

Prevention The service will assist with a shared understanding of the child's needs and their carers difficulties, to determine how best to intervene and respond to achieve positive outcomes and avoid the needs of young people escalating further.

Integration The service is a multi-agency partnership where integration is key to good service delivery arrangements.

Collaboration Collaboration is a key approach by placing young people at the centre of their support. Working with the network around the child working towards positive wellbeing outcomes.

Involvement Participation and engagement arrangements will be strengthened as part of this working arrangement.

6. Climate Change Implications

6.1 There are no climate change implications arising from this report.

7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications

7.1 This report provides updates regarding how Foster Wales Bridgend are meeting their duties to promote the wellbeing of children via undertaking activities to support recruitment of foster carers and supporting children to reside with connected persons where assessed as safe to do so.

8. Financial Implications

Therapeutic Team Welsh Government Grant Funding

8.1 The grant funding is for purposes in accordance with the eliminating profit priorities, and to strengthen the therapeutic model and capacity to implement, BCBC submitted an application for, and secured funding, to strengthen residential staffing structures and develop and implement a dedicated support team in fostering and residential services from Welsh Government.

Confirmation of funding has been received from WG which is set out below:

- 2022/23 £129,304
- 2023/24 £1,228,268
- 2024/25 £1,538,785

8.2 Funding is available for 3 years (Financial years 2022/23–2024/25), and it is unknown at this stage if funding will continue beyond this initial term.

8.3 There is evidence from other local authorities who have implemented similar services that reductions in independent residential placements over a medium-term period could be made – which could be used to offset costs of the service beyond 2024/25 – if Welsh Government funding does not continue beyond then.

8.4 Additionally, if Welsh Government funding is reduced or ceased post-2025, we will ensure there are the necessary clauses within commissioned contracts to end any arrangements entered into, or to allow amendments to reduce provision/funding, leaving minimal financial risk to the local authority.

9. Recommendation

9.1 It is recommended that Cabinet Committee – Corporate Parenting notes the contents of this report.