

Fostering Recruitment Strategy

2020-2023



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1. Executive Summary

This strategy sets out Bracknell Forest Council's approach to recruiting in-house foster carers over the next three years. The aspiration is to place as many children locally as possible where they can benefit from local health and education arrangements and are less likely to suffer social isolation, however currently there is an insufficient number of in-house carers.

The number of children looked after (CLA) in Bracknell Forest continues to rise significantly each year and there is a high proportion of teenagers in the CLA population who are prone to suffering placement instability. Whilst Bracknell Forest Council's total number of foster carers has risen in the past three years, the proportion of CLA to in-house carers is getting higher, as are foster carer resignations. Recruitment has been successful with more carers approved at March 2019 than in the previous two years however the local authority fell slightly short of recruiting the target of ten mainstream carers within 12 months when friends and family and fostering to adopt carers were excluded. Reasons include a higher percentage than average number of applicants withdrawing and some lengthy assessment times.

The aim continues to be to recruit at least 10 new mainstream foster carers annually, ideally households who are willing to care for children 10 years old or over. To achieve this, marketing activity will be targeted primarily towards people aged 35-55 years living within 10 miles of Bracknell. The council's key strengths will be highlighted in the attraction of new foster carers, including our good Ofsted rating and willingness to support those prospective carers who wish to work alongside fostering where possible. In addition, we will look to implement improvements to help ensure the assessment process for new carers is as timely as possible.

2. Aims and objectives

The key aims and objectives of this strategy are follows:

- To improve local placement choice and stability for children looked after (CLA) in Bracknell Forest, particularly for teenagers
- To increase the number of in-house placements and reduce the usage of independent fostering agencies and residential care

This will be achieved if we can recruit more in-house foster carers to our network who can help meet the needs of looked after children in Bracknell Forest.

Our target is to recruit at least 10 additional foster carers annually.

3. Looked After Children/Needs Analysis

Numbers and characteristics of children looked after nationally at 31 March 2019

Nationally at 31 March 2019, 78,150 children were looked after children. This is an increase of 4% from the previous year and over 10% from three years prior. Whilst the number of children starting to be looked after dropped slightly by 2% since 2018, the same drop was seen in the number of children ceasing to be looked after. The number of adoptions fell by 7% in the 12 months previous and the number of unoccupied asylum-seeking children increased by 11% during the same time.

The average age of CLA has been increasing steadily over the past five years with 39% aged 10-15 years and 24% 16 years and over at 31 March 2019.

The majority of CLA nationally are of White ethnicity (74%) however the percentage has been dropping since 2015. It is likely this decrease is due to the broadly non-white make-up of unoccupied asylum-seeking children (UASC).

Across all local authorities placements inside the council boundary accounted for 58% however 20% of CLA were not placed within 20 miles of home. [1]

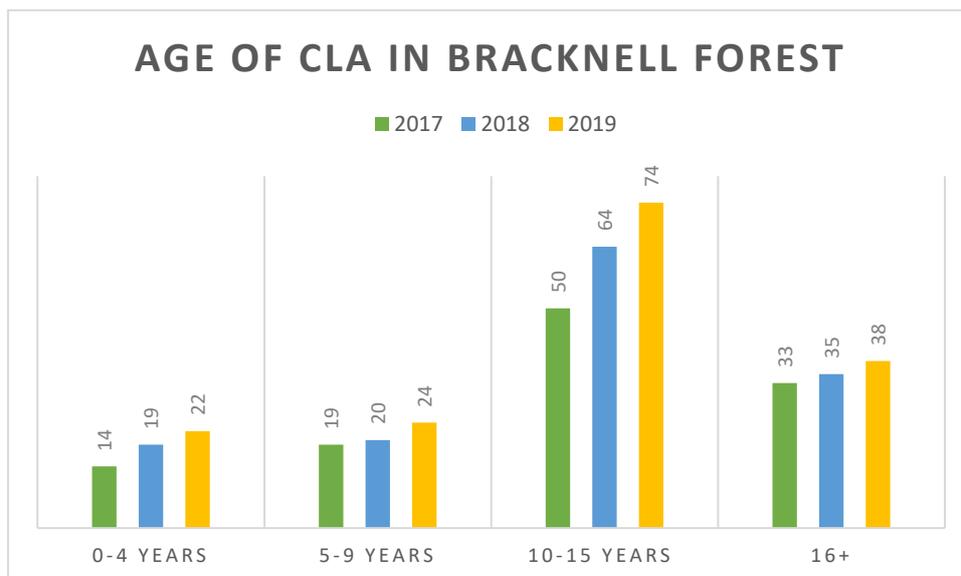
Numbers and characteristics of children looked after in Bracknell Forest at 31 March 2019

In Bracknell Forest, there are 158 CLA at 31 March 2019. This is an increase of 15% from the previous year, higher than the national increase. Over the same period the number of adoptions and SGOs granted fell. More recently numbers have started to reduce which could be because of edge of care work and the mythology of Family Safeguarding Model to keep children safely within their family.

In terms of age, 47% of Bracknell Forest’s CLA are aged 10-15 years and 24% are 16 years or over. The average age is higher than the national average, highlighting a need for more carers for teenagers. This is supported by reviewing placements requested for young people between April – December 2019 of which over 70% were for children 10 and above.

Figure one below illustrates the rise in CLA by age. The largest increase is in children aged 10-15 years of age at March 2019 (an increase in 24 young people from March 2017).

Figure 1.



At March 2019, 80% of Bracknell Forest’s CLA were White ethnicity, 13% were Black and 8% were Mixed. There was a decrease from 82% in 2018 of CLA who were reported as White.

When reviewing the distance that Bracknell Forest’s CLA are placed from home, it is evident that whilst newly accommodated children can generally be placed with local in-house carers, 29% of all CLA (excluding those placed with parents or placed for adoption) are placed more than 20 miles from home. In addition, at March 2019, almost 20% (19.6%) of Bracknell Forest’s CLA had three or more placements during the year. [2]

4. Foster carer cohort

Nationally at 31 March 2019, there are 44,450 fostering households which is an increase of 2% from the previous year. 53% of households had multiple approvals however the main placement type was split as follows: non-permanent/short term (41%), permanent/long-term (35%) and family and friends (16%), other e.g. respite, short breaks (8%). There was an increase in the number of households whose primary offer was permanent or family and friends compared with last year. Households with not permanent offers decreased in the same period. [2]

At March 2019, the current number of Bracknell Forest fostering households is 68 including friends and family foster carers. This is up from 61 in the previous year representing an 11% increase. The largest growth has been in non-permanent/short term carers which account for 50% of carers. The other types of placement offered is permanent (21%), family and friends (25%) and other (4%). We have more non-permanent and family and friends carers than the national average but fewer permanent as no permanent carers have been recruited in the past three years.

At March 2019, 21 foster carers were de-registered which was an increase by a third on the previous year of 14. This was instigated by the carers for a mix of reasons.

The average age of a Bracknell Forest foster carer is 55 years and they were approved seven years ago. The majority of Bracknell Forest foster carers are in a couple with approximately 23% of carers single. More than half of our fostering households would be open to, or are currently, fostering a teenager. Typically, those that are willing to take teenagers are those who have parented or worked with teenagers in the past or are experienced foster carers who have built up their confidence.

Over 65% of Bracknell Forest Council's fostering households have at least one person not working in order to care for children. This contrasts with the authority's cohort of carers in assessment and recently approved who are more likely to be working than have one person at home full-time.

Similar to Bracknell Forest's CLA and local resident ethnicity as noted in the 2011 census, the majority of in-house carers are White (94%). The ethnicity of the remaining 7% carers was split as follows: 3% Black, 2% Asian, 1% mixed. Whilst there is a lower number of Asian carers than in the resident population (5%) there is also a lower percentage of Asian CLA. [3]

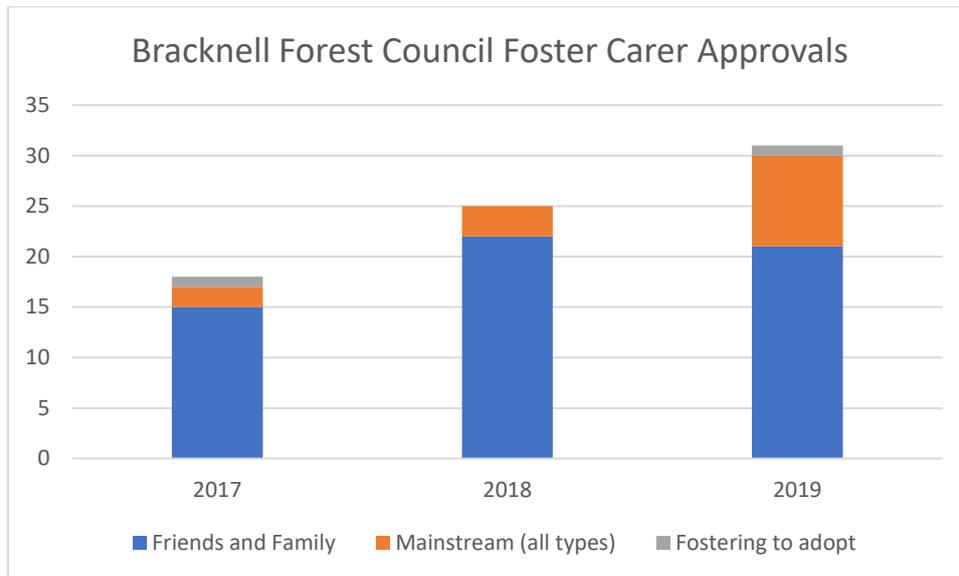
4. Recruitment performance at March 2019

Nationally, fostering enquiries have risen with the largest increase in the IFA sector (11% versus 4% local authorities). Typically, within the year 8% of all enquiries resulted in application to foster. This conversion rate saw the number of applications drop compared to 2018 however approvals are up by 2% across both LA and IFAs at March 2019.

Bracknell Forest Council has seen an increase in enquiries and approvals every year for the past three years. At March 2019, 29 carers were approved within the 12 months (including friends and family and fostering to adopt) [4].

Figure 2 below illustrates the increase in carers approved by type each year.

Figure 2.



The biggest increase in approvals from 2018 to 2019 by fostering type was of mainstream carers. 12% of mainstream enquiries to Bracknell Forest Council resulted in an application and a total of nine mainstream households approved. [4]

Factors that contributed to the increase in mainstream carers recruited in 2019 by the council include more effective spend of the marketing budget, more staffing resource/community outreach as a result of the Cornerstone project, the introduction of one point of contact for people from enquiry to application plus improvements to the website and application form.

Of Bracknell Forest Council's mainstream fostering applications, a slightly higher than average number of applicants withdrew within the year than reported in national figures. The most common reasons for enquirers not moving forward once in assessment were personal/family reasons, lack of time or finances and changing their mind [5].

Seemingly with the cost of living increasing, particularly housing, fostering is less financially viable for some households, especially where there is a single carer. Many households cannot afford to live on the fostering allowance alone and working alongside can be a difficult balance with CLA requiring a high level of support.

In addition, the average time for a mainstream prospective carer to reach approval from application was nine months. The average assessment time impacts on the number of approvals that can be achieved with 12 months so reducing this time is important. It is hoped that this will be achieved with a move to having dedicated social workers focussed on assessments.

Of the mainstream foster carers approved by Bracknell Forest Council at March 2019 eight were non-permanent and one short breaks, most with a preference for primary school aged children, usually due concerns about the impact a teenager could have on other children in the home and/or the experience the carers have.

5. Competitor analysis

One of the challenges to recruiting foster carers in Bracknell Forest is competition from independent fostering agencies (IFAs) and other local authorities. As a unitary authority Bracknell Forest Council has a small area in which to recruit in (42 square miles) and we are bordered by several other authorities.

Competitor analysis conducted locally in 2018 revealed that Bracknell Forest Council's latest "good" Ofsted judgement for children's services is superior to all other neighbouring local authorities including Reading, Wokingham, Windsor & Maidenhead and Surrey.

In comparison to IFAs, Bracknell Forest Council offers locally-based prospective carers the largest choice of placements, particularly for primary school aged children, as well as local incentives such as free use of attractions, training, social events and a local support network. In addition, Bracknell Forest Council will often allow prospective foster carers to be working providing they have a flexible/part-time role and can give enough time to the child however many IFAs in Berkshire insist on at least one person not working.

Bracknell Forest Council however does not have a tiering system to allowances and in some cases pay less for placements. Also, one neighbouring authority recently introduced free council tax for foster carers which was not agreed in Bracknell Forest.

Although foster carers tend not to cite money as a key reason for them fostering, most admit they could not do it without the money. Increasingly even foster carers in couples are needing to work to be financially stable and cannot afford to give up work to foster full-time. For those in this situation, Bracknell Forest Council promotes respite fostering, something the authority rarely use independent foster carers for.

6. Local foster carer attraction

To achieve Bracknell Forest Council's fostering recruitment target and increase approvals of mainstream carers, a multi-channel marketing and publicity plan will be built upon to reach key audiences.

This will include some partnership working where possible with local businesses, community groups as well as schools and the Lexicon. Bracknell Forest Council will utilise our existing foster carers as advocates at information events where possible.

The focus of this will be to:

1. Raise awareness of the need for more foster carers locally
2. Promote the USPs of Bracknell Forest Council as identified via competitor analysis

Marketing activity will be targeted towards people 35-55 living within 10 miles of Bracknell in line with research on age of carers on approval by the Fostering Network (2015). The local authority will not exclude anyone based on their sexual orientation, ethnicity or gender. The aim is to generate at least 100 suitable enquiries per year from our target audience and nurture these through to application and approval to meet the target of ten new households annually.

The full plan for next year's activity and how it will be measured will be set-out in an annual marketing plan following a review of this years' success.

8. Summary

In summary it is of upmost importance that more foster carers for recruited by Bracknell Forest Council. The number of looked after children is increasing, as is their age, and resignations are high within the current cohort of carers, many of which have fostered for several years.

Although Bracknell Forest Council may not always pay the most for placements, it benefits from a good Ofsted and offers locally-based carers the highest placement choice and high occupancy levels. It also looks to approve those that need to work alongside fostering where possible.

Whilst the number of carers being approved has increased, Bracknell Forest Council fallen slightly short of recruiting ten mainstream foster carers within 12 months. The future marketing approach will build on success to date and we will continue to drive improvements and efficiencies in assessments where possible to help ensure as many people as possible who are interested and suitable for fostering are approved within 26 weeks.

The aim for the next three years is to attract at least 100 enquiries a year to meet the local authority's recruitment target of 10 new mainstream foster carers approved annually. Whilst many new carers prefer primary school aged children, with support some carers do go on to take teenagers therefore no restrictions will be put on who is assessed.

References

- [1] National Statistics, Children looked after in England (including adoption year) ending 31 March 2019 cited at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2018-to-2019>
- [2] Management Information, Vulnerable Children (Sept 2019) Bracknell Forest Council
- [3] National Statistics (2019) Fostering in England April 2018 – March 2019. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2018-to-31-march-2019>
- [4] Fostering data set (2019) Bracknell Forest Council
- [5] Census (2011) Available at <http://health.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/jsna/bracknell-forest-profile/demography/ethnicity/>
- [6] Bracknell Forest Council (2019) Recruitment Tracker