

## NORTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL

## SOCIAL WORK DEPARTMENT

<b>Social Work Committee :</b> <b>Operations and Services Sub Committee</b> <b>9th November, 1999</b>	<b>Subject : Fostering Good Relations: A</b> <b>Study of Foster Care and Foster Carers in</b> <b>Scotland</b>
<b>From :</b> <b>Jim Dickie, Director of Social Work</b> <b>Prepared by :</b> <b>Sandra Paterson, Principal Officer,</b> <b>Child Care</b>	

1. **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 To advise Committee on the main findings of a study of foster carers in Scotland.

2. **INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 This report draws together the findings from a two stage study on foster care in Scotland which was commissioned by the Scottish Executive Central Research Unit. The first stage focused on the characteristics and circumstances of foster carers and the second on the organisation and structure of fostering services. The methodology included postal surveys, interviews and a census. It was carried out in 1996 and 1997.
- 2.2 The main findings are set out below with a commentary on each of North Lanarkshire's position.

3. **THE MAIN FINDINGS**

- 3.1 In relation to the structure and organisation of the service, 82% of the agencies delivering of the service was divided between area child care social work teams and teams of placement or link workers. The former who carry responsibility for the child and the child's family and the latter who act as support workers to foster carers.

Three quarters of the agencies mentioned a clear division between the social work case responsibility for the child and the child's family.

**In North Lanarkshire link work to the carer is separate from the support of the child and family except in cases where the child is placed in a fostering placement long term.**

- 3.2 In relation to fostering policy and strategy the profile of fostering within many authorities was low adversely affecting policy development and resourcing.

The researchers found few fostering policy and long term strategy documents.

Managers suggested that the absence of suitable management information systems was hampering strategic planning.

Resource constraints did not allow shortcomings and gaps in services identified by carers and service managers to be addressed.

**In North Lanarkshire there is a staff member with a specific responsibility for adoption and fostering who leads a children's services plan strategy sub group which addresses the issues of strategy and policy.**

**The Children's Services Plan addresses strategic issues. Strathclyde Regional Council policy and guidance is gradually being revised, although this is a lengthy and time consuming process. There are adequate information systems but constant effort is required to keep these updated.**

- 3.3 In respect of recruitment approximately half of the agencies had run a recruitment campaign with placement workers taking most of the responsibility for campaigns.

In around half of the agencies, formal campaigns were reported to have been delayed by budgetary constraints and the non availability of experienced staff. Managers had mixed views of the value of campaigns and the study did not find a single blueprint for a successful campaign. However, there were pointers to success including a good knowledge of the area and the needs, working closely with experienced carers, a well organised system for responding to enquiries involving childrens social worker and their managers, using the local media and monitoring continuity of recruitment campaigns. In many cases the campaigns were often unsystematic.

**North Lanarkshire has a clear recruitment strategy which involves area team staff, foster carers and a rolling programme of advertising in the local media. A recent review of foster care services identified the need for a speedy and efficient response and an agreement that all initial enquiries would be carried out at a central point within agreed timescales by trained and experienced staff.**

**Consequently there has been a steady flow of enquiries to North Lanarkshire.**

- 3.4 In relation to supply and demand the survey found a low average loss of carers, 7% in the year 1st April, 1996 to 31st March, 1997 with new carers exceeding losses by 6% during the same period.

On average 1 in 938 households in Scotland fostered children.

There were large variations in the proportion of children in foster care relative to all looked after children in the area.

**North Lanarkshire has one in 2,400 households which fosters children and the balance of foster care to looked after children is 108 to 638. In the year April, 1997 to 31st March, 1998 almost 20% of carers were lost and there was a gain of 2% giving a net loss of 18%.**

- 3.5 In relation to support from social workers and placement workers or link workers there was considerable dissatisfaction amongst carers about the level of support for the children and themselves including frequency of visits from and availability of social workers.

Most carers said they required support on how to manage integrating the children into their families, the children's behaviour, contact between the children and their families, outside agencies and the conditions of their service.

**In North Lanarkshire there have been two training events for link workers to ensure there is clarity about their role regarding supervising the carer.**

**As a result of the previous review changes are taking place to ensure that placements are supported by staff trained and experienced in this area of work.**

- 3.6 With respect to assessment and monitoring on the whole agencies lacked clear standards, guidelines and procedures for the assessment and matching of children. Placements were mostly determined by the supply of carers rather than the needs of children.

Seven out of ten agencies had no guidance for staff on the preparation of carers before a child arrived.

There was no clear policy or agreement on how much information agencies should share with carers on the children's background and circumstances.

**With respect to assessment and monitoring North Lanarkshire procedures have been issued for the completion of assessments including timescales.**

**In respect of matching new North Lanarkshire procedures are being applied.**

**At the inception of the Council the change in structure and in personnel led to some assessments being of a lower standard. When reviewed this was considered to be due to the relative inexperience of some workers. Training in assessment has since been offered to area teams and workers have built up a level of expertise which has meant that the standard of both assessment and matching has improved substantially.**

**The North Lanarkshire Council Social Work Department Looked After Children materials give clear guidelines on what information should be passed to carers when a child becomes looked after and accommodated. There is still an issue in first draft of new procedures emergency short term placements of insufficient foster care resources which means children's placements are often determined by the availability of carers rather than their needs.**

- 3.7 Financial aspects were considered to be of the most concern to foster carers and managers. While almost all pay the National Foster Care rates there were still issues in relation to levels of uniformity of payment policies about individual grants, clarity about and efficiency with payments.

Carers paid a fee were more likely than other carers to support a salaried service, be satisfied with the operating of the fostering service, see benefits for children to have contact with their parents and attend training and support groups. Little evidence was found to suggest that agencies were moving towards responding to the financial expectations and aspirations of the service.

**A report has already been presented to Committee which reviewed the allowances and recommended a uniform standard for payment of 100% enhancement for those taking children 12 years and above and 50% for those taking children under 12 years.**

This was to address some of the issues outlined above. It means payments are uniform throughout the Council, tie carers into mandatory training and give a message to carers that their services are valued. It is expected that more carers may also be attracted as resources for the department.

- 3.8 In respect of carer reviews and monitoring systems there was no systematic approach to setting up specific agreement with carers, reviewing carers and eliciting the stakeholders view of the service.

In North Lanarkshire in 1998/1999 there was a best value review of the service. This review was informed by a survey of foster carers in 1996 and further informed by interviews in 1999 which asked for carers views on a range of issues.

Pro formas for specific agreements with carers are currently being produced.

The issue of foster care reviews still needs to be addressed to ensure that these are taking place within procedural timescales and a new procedural draft is due to be implemented after 8th November, 1999.

#### Summary

The study pointed towards the need for the integration of all fostering activities and placement services under a single management and delivery structure with built in monitoring systems. It suggested the need for a review of the level of support provided to children and their carers and the financial arrangements for carers.

The North Lanarkshire review of services accompanied by development monies from the Scottish Executive which was to be targeted to the fostering service has allowed North Lanarkshire Council Social Work department to enhance and realign some aspects of the service. Three social workers will now be appointed to undertake assessments and some link work and will be managed centrally. As previously stated the financial support to carers was enhanced. These proposals were subject to Committee reports.

There is currently an Association of Directors of Social Work/Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (ADSW/COSLA) working group looking at many of the aspects of the fostering service. The report is likely to be available for elected members and staff before the end of the year. This report will address most of the issues raised in this study and will be the subject of a further Committee report.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATION

Committee is asked to note the contents of this report.



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