

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

6TH MARCH 2008

FOSTER CARER RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN

**BRENDA THOMPSON- EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR
CHILDREN FAMILIES & LEARNING**

**GILL ROLLINGS- EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF
CHILDREN, FAMILIES & LEARNING**

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. The purpose of this report is to raise members' awareness of the diminishing number of Middlesbrough Council Foster Carers and the current and potential impact of this upon children looked after by Middlesbrough Council. The report aims to illustrate the recruitment strategy to date, provide details of the proposed campaign and clarify the role that elected members might play in supporting the recruitment drive.

BACKGROUND

2. The Fostering Service's original recruitment strategy was devised by the Family Placement Development Officer and implemented in 2000. The underlying approach of the strategy was to drip feed information to the local population using different types of publicity throughout the year. The budget to support recruitment has always been very limited – averaging £5,000 per annum - which has meant that the amount of advertising has been limited and the presentation of written material has been basic.

3. The strategy did, however, produce a significant increase in the number of enquiries, applications and approvals for the first three to four years after implementation. Indeed, the highest number of foster carers Middlesbrough has ever had available to its children rose to 114 at around this time. The strategy has been less effective in the last 2-3 years and the service has experienced a net loss of carers as can be seen in the table attached (Appendix 1). The data given to Ofsted for the most recent inspection (October 2007) showed that there were 99 carers who were looking after 136 children. The current figure stands at 93 carers, of whom 11 are awaiting de-registration, one to transfer to an Independent Fostering Agency and the remaining are resigning for a variety of family and/or health related reasons.
4. Since the implementation of the original recruitment strategy in 2000, the context in which Middlesbrough Fostering Service operates has undergone a dramatic change. A rapid growth in independent fostering agencies means that people interested in fostering have a variety of agencies to choose from. It is also felt that demographic factors, both national (e.g. the changes in family structures and the role of women, pressure to take paid employment and the low status of volunteering) and local (high levels of deprivation and a falling population) affect the recruitment of carers.
5. In March 2007, the recruitment strategy was reviewed by the Family Placement Development Officer and the Sure Start Marketing Manager. This joint working resulted in an increase in advertising opportunities from April 2007. The outcome of this has been an increased number of enquires and initial visits (136 enquiries and 38 initial visits in nine months to December '07) but no corresponding increase in applications. (Appendix 1) Alongside this issue, is the fact that Middlesbrough Foster Carers have, for the first time, begun to show an interest in transferring to independent agencies. There were 8 enquiries to SWIIS in 2007 and one carer, who currently looks after three Middlesbrough children, has been assessed and is ready to transfer.
6. In January 2008, funding became available for further joint work with Sure Start and it was agreed that this would take the form of an intensive advertising campaign. The following advertisements and other measures will be put in place as part of the campaign:
 - Adshell posters at 10 locations in Middlesbrough for 4 weeks from 24th March
 - An advert in the Middlesbrough Football club programme for each home game
 - An advert in the Middlesbrough Herald and Post
 - A 2 page 'advertorial' in the Middlesbrough Gazette
 - A Community Roadshow in Middlesbrough Mall from Monday 3rd March to Sunday 9th March, consisting of a display stand with a multi-media presentation and with leaflets and other promotional items being handed out to the public – supported by Fostering Team staff and Foster Carers.
 - A radio advert on Century Radio

- A launch event which will be held in conjunction with the re-branding of the Child Care Information Centre to 'The Family Information Service'.
- The purchase of 2 additional portable display banners
- The purchase of information leaflets and a DVD for use at information evenings and other promotional events
- The re-design of the Fostering Information Pack so it is available in full colour layout, using the skills of a graphic designer

The expenditure agreed so far totals £16,200, however, some of the plans have not yet been finalised and the total expenditure on the campaign is likely to be in the region of £25,000.

7. Whilst there is no guarantee that this campaign will result in an increase in applications from prospective foster carers, it is essential that every effort is made to publicise the need to increase this essential resource. The campaign is working in tandem with a review of the foster care payment system, which should, at the very least, help the service to retain existing carers. The ultimate aim is to attract newcomers i.e. those who are currently going to independent agencies, by virtue of the publicity, the remuneration that the service offers and the support and training opportunities provided for them as Middlesbrough carers. In so doing, the service will provide children with local foster carers, within their home town, close to family and school and supported by a 'care team' from one agency.
8. Elected members, as the corporate parents of the town's children, could help to raise the profile of Foster Care in the town by:
 - Promoting the need for "Local Foster Carers for Local Children" in their day to day work within the community: in schools, at residents meetings and in their Ward surgeries.
 - Taking part in the Community Roadshow in the Middlesbrough Mall to be held between Monday 3rd March and Sunday 9th March.
 - Using promotional material on a personal level e.g. carry leaflets, flyers, and put a car sticker in their window.
 - Attending the launch of the campaign, bringing people who may be able to promote the recruitment campaign.
 - Maintaining ongoing links with the Fostering Service and its carers to ensure that there is 'recruitment and retention momentum'.

FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND WARD IMPLICATIONS

9. There are financial implications arising from this report in terms of:
 - a) The need to complete the review of foster carer payments and allowances.

- b) The cost of the recruitment campaign, as outlined in paragraph 6.
 - c) The cost to the authority of not improving recruitment, i.e. the increased use of more costly, independent agency foster carers. Along with this financial cost, is the 'cost' to children and their families of being placed outside of the Middlesbrough area or the Middlesbrough systems and practices – which are safe and robust.
10. There are no immediate legal implications arising from this report.
11. There are implications for all Wards in that elected members, should they choose to accept the mission, will be publicising the need for foster carers within their Ward and across the town. This report will, therefore, be of interest to all members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

12. It is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Board advise the Executive to:
- a). note the information relating to the Fostering Service Recruitment Campaign.
 - b). seek the active support of all elected Members for the recruitment campaign.

REASONS

13. The Council is responsible for providing high quality care for its children, which is often best provided by locally-based foster carers. Elected Members can play a key role in encouraging and supporting local people who wish to be considered as foster carers.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report;

- *Recruitment Monitoring statistics – Family Placement Development Officer*
- *SWIFT Data – Data Technician*

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Appendix 1

Middlesbrough Council Children Families & Learning Department

Summary of fostering recruitment statistics for April 2002 to March 2007

| Recruitment | 2002/3 | 2003/4 | 2004/5 | 2005/6 | 2006/7 |
|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Number of enquiries | 184 | 151 | 139 | 136 | 165 |
| Number of requests for initial visits | 64 | 58 | 37 | 37 | 38 |
| Number of applications | 16 | 8 | 6 | 9 | 6 |
| Number of new registrations | 16 | 9 | 2 | 5 | 3 |
| Number of de-registrations | 4 | 9 | 7 | 11 | 5 |
| Number of registered carers on 31 st March | 112 | 112 | 107 | 101 | 99 |

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