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Removing barriers to foster care recruitment: Kirklees Council

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Brief description

Amid a backdrop of increasing financial pressures on local authorities to make savings, combined with a rise in numbers, nationally, of children coming in to care, Kirklees Council has adopted a marketing framework to help in their recruitment of foster carers. This approach has been used to develop a long-term recruitment strategy that is facilitating the effective planning, delivery, evaluation and review of fostering services for children.

Overview – the provider's message

'Key to our success has been the development of a long-term strategic approach with clear business objectives and targets from the start.

Our strategic marketing approach has had a major and positive impact on the whole service, inspiring managers to re-evaluate working practices, to improve systems, to become more focused on the needs of carers and children and to align staffing more appropriately. It has ensured that the whole service is now more suited to meeting the needs of children, carers and potential carers.

The campaign's success in raising the profile of fostering services has also raised staff morale in a difficult and challenging profession'.

Alison O'Sullivan, Director, Children and Adults

The good practice in detail

The need for change

The rise in numbers of looked after children, nationally, has resulted in councils relying increasingly on independent fostering agencies to provide placements for looked after children because they do not have sufficient capacity to meet the needs of children in their own provision. Historically, Kirklees had lower numbers of looked after children and used a higher percentage of independent fostering agencies than neighbouring authorities. This not only meant that children were, sometimes, being placed further away from their homes and communities but also placed significant pressure financially on the service. A placement in an independent fostering agency costs on average between £400 and £600 per week more than the council's own fostering provision.

Work in the mainstream fostering team involved competing priorities as the team was recruiting as well as providing ongoing support. This meant that assessments were often delayed because of the need to respond to more urgent issues.

Historically, the fostering recruitment officer was given marketing responsibilities but was not a marketing professional. The approach to advertising was ad hoc with no mechanism for evaluating advertising campaigns to help future target audiences effectively and inform future planning and service delivery. Business processes were primarily paper-based and did not contribute to service evaluation.

In April 2010, the council recognised the need for improvement and committed to investing in resources to increase its internal fostering capacity. This involved appointing a dedicated corporate marketing manager to develop a long-term marketing strategy. It also involved re-structuring the fostering service to provide one team solely dedicated to recruitment and a separate team to provide support for foster carers following panel approval.

The marketing framework

The marketing plan is structured using the SOSTAC planning framework which is widely used among marketing professionals to provide an effective approach to strategic marketing planning:

S=Situation analysis: Where are we now?

O=Objectives: Where do we want to get to?

S=Strategies: How do we get there?

T=Tactics: What are the individual steps we need to take to achieve our objective?

A=Actions: What are the things we need to do and when?

C=Control: What will we measure to know we are succeeding?

The marketing strategy is based on intelligence gathered through detailed analysis of where the service is at and defining where the service wants to be demonstrating how success of strategies can be monitored in relation to business objectives.

The initial review of the service looked in depth at internal and external environments so that the service starting point and market were fully understood.

For example:

In 2007, the National Fostering Network carried out a study called 'Why do people enquire but don't proceed'. Their findings showed:

- over 80% of initial enquiries to fostering do not result in a firm application;
- nearly half of the people ,who enquired about fostering between 2004 and 2006, were still thinking about fostering in 2007.

This information was used to formulate marketing objectives, which included a tactical approach in terms of media buying channels and, more importantly, articulated how success would be evaluated. For example, as a result of the insight above, the service set out to generate over 300 enquiries in the first year and to also revisit prospective carers who had expressed an interest in previous recruitment campaigns but had not followed this through.

Kirklees uses a blend of traditional and new media to ensure that they reach their target audiences. New media make targeting and measuring campaigns more effective; this is complemented by traditional media and supported fully by PR activities during each campaign burst. Google analytics is used to monitor traffic to the website, where visitors come from, how long visitors are on the website for and which part of the website they spend most of their time on.

The recruitment team

The team focuses on the recruitment, assessment and training of foster carers as well as service development. It consists of a social work team manager, five social workers, a dedicated corporate marketing manager and administrative support. Social workers are an integral part of recruitment campaigns. They take initial enquiries from prospective foster carers and carry out an initial visit within 14 days. They also deliver the 'skills to foster' training course over three consecutive Saturdays, which is followed by a formal assessment process that consists of about eight visits to the foster carer. The completed application and social worker's report is then presented to the panel and, if approved, the newly appointed foster carer will be matched with a child for their first placement straight away.



A foster carer's perspective

We first talked about fostering when Connor and Jordan were both at school full time. However, when I became pregnant with the twins, we thought that would be the end to our hopes of fostering. Then, last year, we went along to a Huddersfield Giants match where foster carers were handing information out - they asked us if we had ever considered fostering, to which I said, we didn't think we could foster as we already had four children of



our own. We were surprised when they told us that there are no hard and fast rules and that as long as we have the room in our home to care for another child, we should give it a go.

We thought about it for a little while and decided to go for it. We ran through some early questions over the phone and the following week a social worker visited us at home to talk to us. To our delight, despite us having four children and renting our home, we were encouraged to apply.

Lee and I talked about it with the children and we all agreed that we wanted to become a foster family. We went on training in March this year and were approved at a panel in June.

Because we both smoked at the time, we couldn't foster children under five - a government rule. So, we were approved to care for children between the ages of five and 10. We were told that we can change this to care for younger children too as soon as we've stopped smoking for 12 months.

Just a few days after being approved at panel, our social worker rang asking us to look after a nine-year-old little girl. We were all excited, anxious and worried, but as soon as she was with us we knew she would fit in perfectly with our family. She got on brilliantly with our children and despite only being with us briefly, we really missed her when she left us to return to her birth family.

You are not on your own when you foster. We have been to foster carers' support network meetings and our eldest children have even been to birth children's groups. These are great for us as we get to talk to other people who are in the same position and we can share experiences and ideas. I have booked to go on some training courses this autumn so that'll help us develop and grow as foster carers.

If you've ever thought about fostering, I would say, don't rule yourself out; get in touch with the fostering team and give it a go. We love it.

Key challenges and impact

Sharing expertise between marketing and social work professionals required a culture change to begin with. There was an initial reluctance to relinquish previously established roles within the fostering team and take on a new approach that included working directly with the media. However, having clearly defined goals has facilitated an understanding of and confidence in the role. This more flexible structure is helping the team to take a more strategic approach to their work.

The introduction of regular team performance clinics is facilitating a better understanding of the impact of the work and is enabling the team to respond to changes in service needs, for example, increasing the number and frequency of panel meetings to ensure assessment timescales remain on track.

The use of research continues to be an integral part of the team's approach to service development. This is helping to break down some of the barriers to fostering and is enabling the service to think more broadly about ruling people in as opposed to ruling people out. For example, the team has conducted a study on the impact of the use of anti-depressants on the ability to foster. The research is being used to develop a more creative approach to the recruitment, assessment and training of individual foster carers.

The continuity of social work input from initial contact through to approval has improved response times significantly. The service has seen a reduction in the average length of the foster carer assessment process from eight to four and a half months.

Kirklees is part way through its five-year plan and is reflective about the key challenges of this approach. It is using its evaluation of services to date to inform future service delivery.

'As a result of the growth in the number of children coming into care, there has been a requirement for a significantly higher number of foster placements. This has meant that the recruitment of additional carers has been of even greater importance; but as a result of all the changes we have made in the last three years, we are now seeing an annual saving of £438K.

During the early days of the strategy, we did not see an increase in internal capacity, with a knock-on impact in the number of agency placements required. As the strategy began to take effect, we did see an increase in the number of internal carers although this did not keep pace with the rise in the number of children being taken into care. As a result, we saw an ongoing increase in the number of agency placements from 134 in December 2010 to 212 in September 2012. In summary, the growth in the number of looked after children was outstripping the increase in the internal provision, with the balance of placements being provided by agencies.'

Andrew Wainwright Business Manager-Family Support & Child Protection

However, the number of looked after children has stabilised more recently, with the result that the impact of the growing number of internal placements can be seen in the reducing number of agency placements, as shown in the table below:

Year	Agency	Internal
December 2010	38%	62%
September 2012	46%	54%
September 2013	35%	65%

Key data

Number of looked after children:

December 2010: 580

September 2013: 642 (an increase of 11.5% since December 2010)

Number of internal foster placements (including family & friends):

December 2010: 215

September 2012: 247

September 2013: 264 (an increase of 16.3% since December 2010)

Financial impact

It is difficult to establish an accurate financial impact as the payment structure has changed since 2010/11. However, based on the average number of foster placements for 2013/14 (412), the December 2010 level of internal provision (215) and current unit costs, the following shows what the financial position be without the increase in internal provision:

	Unit cost (Sept 2013)	Number of placements	Equivalent annual cost
Internal fostering	£315	215	£3,522k
Agency fostering	£783	197	£8,021k
Total		412	£11,543k

The saving potential is calculated as follows:

	Unit Cost (Sept 2013)
Potential expenditure without strategy	£11,543k
Current projected expenditure 2013/14	£10,721k
Projected cost of recruitment team 2013/14	£384k
Total savings expected per annum	£438k

Provider background

[The Metropolitan Borough of Kirklees](#) is one of five local authorities in West Yorkshire. It covers an area of 157 square miles and has a population of around 426,000 of which 25.5% are aged 0 to 19 (nationally 23.8%).

Kirklees has a mix of relatively affluent and poor areas. Thirty seven areas of the borough are ranked amongst the 10% most deprived in England. Minority ethnic communities, which make up 21% of the population, tend to live in these poorest areas.

Household income levels in the poorest communities are only 60% of the district average. In some parts of Kirklees, up to 46% of children live in out-of-work families. Wage levels for full-time workers in Kirklees' companies are below the national average.

Annually, Kirklees children's services receives in the region of 4,400 referrals, processes 11,000 contacts and completes 2,800 core assessments.

For further information about this approach please contact Karen Jones at Karen.jones@kirklees.gov.uk

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