

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Report

Committee:	Corporate Parenting Board
Date:	7 December 2022
Title:	Family Connections Service
Report From:	Director of Children's Services

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Purpose of this Report

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the Corporate Parenting Board about the Family Connections Service and the work being done to keep children within their family networks, where possible.

Recommendations

2. That the Corporate Parenting Board notes the update on the work of the Family Connections Service.

Executive Summary

3. This report seeks to inform the Corporate Parenting Board about the Family Connections Service.
4. The Family Connections Service assesses a person connected with a child (family member, friend or another connected adult) to be a foster carer or special guardian. The service also provides support to special guardians once the Special Guardianship Order is granted.
5. The Family Connections Service is expanding to comprise of 1 Team Manager, 3 Assistant Team Managers, 18.5 Social Workers and 3 Children and Family Support Workers. The focus is on assessing the right connected carers, at an early stage to reduce disruption for children and provide them with permanence. There is a focus on supporting connected carers to care for children under SGO rather than connected foster care, to reduce the number of children in care and ensuring the right to a private family life. The service is also expanding to provide post SGO support, to stabilise placements and

reduce the risk of placement breakdowns and children coming back into the care system.

Contextual information

6. The Family Connections Service was set up in August 2021, which combined the existing Connected Carers Assessment Team (CCAT) with assessing social workers based in CAST teams. This created a focussed team, that could assess connected carers and special guardians, while also expanding the offer to provide support once a Special Guardianship Order was granted. The team was previously spread across all 8 districts in Hampshire which meant there was a lack of consistency and overall accountability. There were only 9 permanent social work posts, so there was a reliance on independent social workers to complete assessments, which lacked consistency but was also not cost effective. One of the key drivers in setting up the team was to improve the timeliness and quality of assessments, allowing better quality and more timely decisions to be made about a child's care.
7. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care published in May 2022 has a chapter titled 'Unlocking the potential of family networks'. The focus is to keep children within their family networks where it is safe to do so. They have made several recommendations such as financial allowances being paid to special guardianship carers and kinship carers with a child arrangement order at the same rate as foster carers and developing the peer support and training available to kinship carers. Therefore, the work within Family Connections Service is being shaped by the recommendations within the care review.
8. There is a focus on increasing the number of Special Guardianship Orders being granted, rather than connected carers being approved as foster carers, which would mean that the child would have to remain Looked After and have a high level of Children Service's involvement and oversight. An SGO means that the child is no longer a Looked After Child, with the special guardian being granted parental responsibility. The child doesn't have to have ongoing oversight and involvement from the Local Authority by way of reviews, visits and assessments, which can be intrusive. SGOs allow the child to have a private family life, in line with the Human Rights Act Article 8. However, there is a recognition that the support provided by Hampshire Children's Services to SGO carers needs to be improved and be more in line with the support offered to foster carers, to allow carers to confidently agree to an SGO.

Current situation

9. The team manager for Family Connections Service has been in post since August 2021 and has worked with the children's , fostering and legal teams to

improve the outcomes for children who are placed in care with connected carers. The initial task was to increase performance within the team's established assessment roles, before expanding the remit of the team.

10. The referral process has been streamlined so that connected carers are identified earlier, and assessments are undertaken at the right time. The forms within the team were redesigned to be clearer and training was completed with Family Connections Social Workers about the benefits of children remaining with family but also the common themes that lead to placement breakdowns. This would then allow support to be put into place at an earlier stage. This has been successful, in conjunction with the stability workers within the Intensive Worker Hubs.

11. Effective and timely management oversight has improved the timeliness and quality of assessments and provided data on the outcome of assessments. This has involved the use of spreadsheets to track incoming assessments and the outcomes.

12. The team receives an average of 8 referrals for assessment per week (totalling around 350 per year), however the complexity of referrals and number of children placed under Regulation 24 has increased. Regulation 24 allows a connected carer to be temporarily approved as a foster carer, whilst an assessment is undertaken. This means that the child is placed in their care. Each assessment has a timescale of 12 weeks to be completed, and it is an in depth piece of work involving visits, checks and undertaking references. The team have around 7 ongoing assessments at one time, alongside holding completed assessments where checks are outstanding, they are waiting for a court order to be granted or are waiting to present to fostering panel. The below tables outline cases that have closed in 2021 and 2022 so far, and the outcome for the child. The numbers refer to an assessment of a connected carer, and not a child. Multiple assessments are completed for each child as a parallel plan to ensure there is no delay for the child.

2021:

	Number
Child returned/remained at home with a parent	20
Negative/Withdrawn	189
The carers were assessed positively but the child was placed somewhere else (likely a different connected carer)	16
SGO granted	29
Transferred to fostering as the carers were approved as foster carers	24
Awaiting final outcome / SGO to be granted	3

Grand Total	281
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2022:

	Number
Child returned/remained at home with a parent	25
Negative/Withdrawn	205
The carers were assessed positively but the child was placed somewhere else (likely a different connected carer)	27
SGO granted	41
Transferred to fostering as the carers were approved as foster carers	42
Awaiting final outcome / SGO to be granted	13
Grand Total	353

13. Upon starting in the team, there were a number of outstanding cases due to the high caseloads within what was a small team, which has taken time to resolve. This work has included completing outstanding assessments and supporting carers to apply for Special Guardianship Orders or presenting them to fostering panel for approval. The team has become more efficient in completing assessments in a timely manner.

14. Training has been provided to children's social work teams about connected care and support that is available once an SGO is granted. This training has outlined the legal context of connected carers assessments and the processes within the team.

15. We have commissioned Kinship to deliver 'Kinship Ready' workshops and provide telephone support to kinship carers within Hampshire, which includes not just Special Guardianship carers, but connected carers who may be caring for children as a family arrangement or under another order such as a Child Arrangement Order or Residence Order. The workshops provide training and information to potential SGO carers about the assessment process, as well as knowledge about parenting a child who has experienced trauma. Kinship are a national charity that specialise in Kinship Care and have worked closely to inform the Social Care Review. This contract is in place until March 2023 and will be reviewed.

Next steps

16. Recognising the importance of children remaining safely in their family network under an SGO, the establishment in the team has been increased to meet the volume of assessments required. The increase in establishment also allows the service to offer greater support to special guardians.

Recruitment is underway for the new posts in the team. Once appointed, the focus will be on re-launching the team, in particular the new post SGO service.

17. Working groups will be created with SGO carers and professionals, to ensure that the post SGO service delivers the right support. There is a lack of specific post SGO support being offered to carers, with some receiving support from family support, CAST or not receiving any support at all. Areas that the post SGO service will cover will ensure that Hampshire are delivering the support as outlined within the SGO regulations. This includes setting up more peer support groups, therapeutic support for both the child and the SGO carer, advice around contact issues and placement stability work. Financial support is also being reviewed.

18. The Family Connections Service will continue to provide training across teams within Hampshire about the role of Family Connections, connected foster care and special guardianship.

Finance

19. The business case has incorporated the financial impact of expanding the team. Children being subject to SGOs rather than Care Orders is more cost effective.

Performance

20. No issues

Consultation and Equalities

21. No issues

Other Key Issues

22. N/A

Any other headings (if required)

23. N/A

Conclusions

24. The Family Connections Service is continuing to develop and become embedded, but it is predicted that there will be a greater number of children living with connected carers under an SGO rather than in foster care and a higher level of support being offered to SGO carers. There has been an increase in the number of assessments being completed, so the establishment has been increased to meet this demand. Due to the new processes that are now in place, resources are being effectively allocated so that the right carers are being assessed and there is an increase in children able to live with their connected carers. There is greater oversight of the team due to there being only one Team Manager providing leadership, so that work is consistent and change can be implemented effectively.

REQUIRED CORPORATE AND LEGAL INFORMATION:

Links to the Strategic Plan

Hampshire maintains strong and sustainable economic growth and prosperity:	yes
People in Hampshire live safe, healthy and independent lives:	yes
People in Hampshire enjoy a rich and diverse environment:	yes
People in Hampshire enjoy being part of strong, inclusive communities:	yes

Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents

The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)

Document

Location

None

EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT:

1. Equality Duty

The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by or under the Act with regard to the protected characteristics as set out in section 4 of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation);
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (see above) and persons who do not share it.

Due regard in this context involves having due regard in particular to:

- The need to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
- Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

2. Equalities Impact Assessment:

See guidance at <https://hants.sharepoint.com/sites/ID/SitePages/Equality-Impact-Assessments.aspx?web=1>

Insert in full your **Equality Statement** which will either state:

- (a) *why you consider that the project/proposal will have a low or no impact on groups with protected characteristics or*
- (b) *will give details of the identified impacts and potential mitigating actions*