



St. Helens Council

Town Hall, St. Helens, Merseyside, WA10 1HP

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Agenda

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

PUBLIC MEETINGS ARE WEBCAST (LIVE STREAMED)


Date: Monday, 31 January 2022 Time: 10.00 am Venue: Room 10

Membership

Councillors: Barton-Ainsworth, Greaves, A Johnson, T Long (Chair), McDonnell, Mussell, Osundeko, Preston, Sims and Sweeney

<u>Item</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Page</u>
5.	<u>Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers Task Group Report</u>	3
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jim Leivers Director of Children's Services and Fiona Woods, Head Of Fostering Adoption & Provider Services have been invited to attend the meeting.	

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 <p>ST HELENS BOROUGH COUNCIL</p>	<p align="center">Children and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee</p> <p align="center">31 January 2022</p>
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Report Title:	Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers Task Group Report
Cabinet Portfolio	Children and Young People
Cabinet Member	Councillor Nova Charlton
Exempt Report	No
Reason for Exemption	N/A
Key Decision	No
Public Notice issued	N/A
Wards Affected	All
Report of	Jim Leivers Director of Children's Services JimLeivers@sthelens.gov.uk
Contact Officer	Dominic Rowan Scrutiny Support Officer DominicRowan@sthelens.gov.uk

Borough priorities	Ensure children and young people have a positive start in life	X
	Promote good health, independence, and care across our communities	
	Create safe and strong communities and neighbourhoods for all	
	Support a strong, thriving, inclusive and well-connected local economy	
	Create green and vibrant places that reflect our heritage and culture	
	Be a responsible Council	

1. Summary

- 1.1 The Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee held a Task Group between August to December 2021 into the Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers. The Task Group's Report is attached at Appendix 1 to this report.

2. Recommendations for Decision

Children and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

- i) Approve the Task Group report and recommendations as set out in Appendix 1; and**
- ii) Submit the recommendations to Cabinet for response.**

3. Purpose of this Report

- 3.1 The Task Group's Report and its recommendations are presented to the CYPS Scrutiny Committee for approval and subsequent submission to Cabinet.

4. Background /Reasons for the recommendations

- 4.1 At the beginning of the 2021/22 municipal year, Members of the Children and Young People's Services (CYPS) Scrutiny Committee were concerned about whether there was a sufficient supply of foster carers within the borough to meet the needs of children and young people that required foster care. During the CYPS Committee's work programme planning session held in Summer 2021, Members committed to holding a Task Group to explore the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers within the borough
- 4.2 The Task Group's aims and objectives were agreed as follows:

- To understand the current recruitment process and the barriers and challenges to recruiting new foster carers
- To understand how the Council promotes fostering and engages foster carers
- To understand the impact on children and young people, and Council budgets/services of a potential shortage of foster carers in the Borough
- To discover best promotion and recruitment and retention practice undertaken in other local authorities that could be adopted in St Helens
- To understand the views of current foster carers regarding the recruitment process and retention of foster carers
- To make recommendations on how recruitment and retention of foster carers could be improved.

4.3 The Committee is requested to approve the Task Group Report and its recommendations, as set out in Appendix 1. As per the Council's Constitution, the report will be submitted to Cabinet for a response within the defined timescale. Cabinet's response to the Report will then be brought back to this Committee at a suitable date to be agreed.

5. Community Impact Assessment

5.1 No Community Impact Assessment was carried out for the purpose of submitting the report to the Committee for approval and submission to Cabinet.

6. Consideration of Alternatives

6.1 N/A

7. Conclusions

7.1 The Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee held a Task Group between August to December 2021 into the Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers. The Task Group's Report and its recommendations are attached at Appendix 1 to this report.

7.2 The Committee is requested to approve the Task Group Report and its recommendations, as set out in Appendix 1. As per the Council's Constitution, the report will be submitted to Cabinet for a response within the defined timescale. Cabinet's response to the report and its recommendation will then be brought back to this meeting at a suitable date to be agreed.

8. Implications

8.1 Legal Implications

8.1.1 Legal implications may have to be considered if Cabinet chooses to accept and implement any of the recommendations within the Task Group Report

8.2 Community Impact Assessment (CIA) Implications

8.2.1 Social Value

8.2.1.1 Social value implications may have to be considered if Cabinet chooses to accept/support any of the recommendations within the Task Group Report

8.2.2 Sustainability and Environment

8.2.2.1 There are no sustainability or environment implications considered in the Task Group Report.

8.2.3 Health and Wellbeing

8.2.3.1 Health and wellbeing implications may have to be considered if Cabinet chooses to accept/support any of the recommendations within the Task Group Report

8.2.4 Equality and Human Rights

8.2.4.1 Equality and Human Rights implications may have to be considered if Cabinet chooses to accept/support any of the recommendations within the Task Group Report

8.3 Customers and Resident

8.3.1 Customer and resident implications may have to be considered if Cabinet chooses to accept/support any of the recommendations within the Task Group Report

8.4 Asset and Property

8.4.1 There are no asset and property implications considered in the Task Group Report.

8.5 Staffing and Human Resource

8.5.1 Staffing and human resource implications may have to be considered if Cabinet chooses to accept/support any of the recommendations within the Task Group Report.

8.6 Risks

8.6.1 Cabinet may have to consider the risks associated in deciding whether to accept/support any of the recommendations within the Task Group Report

8.7 Finance

8.7.1 Some of the recommendations within the Task Group Report will have financial implications if they are accepted and implemented by Cabinet. These implications will need to be considered by Cabinet when deciding whether to accept/support the recommendations or not.

8.8 Policy Framework Implications

8.8.1 The Task Group Report supports the achievement of Borough Priority 1 – Ensuring children and young people have a positive start in life.

8.9 Impact and Opportunities on Localities

8.9.1 There are no localities implications identified within the Task Group Report.

9. **Background papers**

9.1 None

10. **Appendices**

10.1 Appendix 1 – Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers Task Group Report

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Children and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

December 2021

**Councillors –
Trisha Long (Chair)
Stuart Barton-Ainsworth
Donna Greaves
Dennis McDonnell
Linda Mussell
Joseph Pearson
Teresa Sims**

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Chair's Foreword and Acknowledgements

Organising foster care for vulnerable children and young people in our Borough is a key responsibility of the Council.

High quality foster care is transformative. It ensures that vulnerable, often traumatised, children and young people have safe, stable, loving and nurturing homes to enable them to flourish, heal and prosper, moving forward to have better lives with better outcomes.

However, there is a national shortage of foster carers and fostering households to meet demand which is reflected locally.

Kevin Williams, CEO of The Fostering Network, said: "Recruitment and retention of high-quality foster carers who can meet the needs of children in care is one of the biggest challenges facing the fostering sector today".

This was underscored by the State of the Nation Foster Care Report published in December 2021 which found "There is a crisis in the retention and recruitment of high-quality foster carers who can meet the needs of children in care. This is the biggest challenge facing the fostering sector today, as a lack of foster carers means that children are missing out on vital support."

Against this national backdrop, the Task Group set out to look at ways in which more people in St Helens, with the right core values, can be encouraged to become foster carers.

Our report sets out the 13 recommendations to help address the challenges. The recommendations have important implications for changes to current practice and, in view of current and future contexts, could not be timelier.

I would like to record my thanks to the Councillors and officers from both St Helens and Liverpool City Council who participated in this piece of work. I would also particularly like to thank St Helens foster carers, in the context of their very busy lives made more difficult by the pandemic. Your participation and feedback will make a real difference.

Trisha Long

Councillor Trisha Long



Introduction and Terms of Reference

- 1.1. At the beginning of the 2021/22 municipal year, Members of the Children and Young People's Services (CYPS) Scrutiny Committee were concerned about whether there was a sufficient supply of foster carers within the borough to meet the needs of children and young people that required foster care. During the CYPS Committee's work programme planning session held in Summer 2021, Members committed to holding a Task Group to explore the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers within the borough.
- 1.2. The Task Group's aims and objectives were agreed as follows:
 - To understand the current recruitment process and the barriers and challenges to recruiting new foster carers
 - To understand how the Council promotes fostering and engages foster carers
 - To understand the impact on children and young people, and Council budgets/services of a potential shortage of foster carers in the Borough
 - To discover best promotion and recruitment and retention practice undertaken in other local authorities that could be adopted in St Helens
 - To understand the views of current foster carers regarding the recruitment process and retention of foster carers
 - To make recommendations on how recruitment and retention of foster carers could be improved.

Method of Investigation

- 2.1 In the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the Task Group held a series of online meetings via Microsoft Teams between August to December 2021 to work through the range of aims and objectives of the review. An overview is provided below:
 - a) Scoping meeting: A meeting was held with Members and Officers to agree the scope of the Task Group's review and consider the range of meetings to be held.
 - b) Theme 1: Background Information – A presentation was delivered by Officers to the Task Group which provided background information on fostering the current demand for placements, and the challenges and barriers to recruiting foster carers
 - c) Theme 2: Views of Foster Carers – To ascertain foster carers views, Members of the Task Group attended a meeting of the Virtual Foster Carers Support Group in October 2021, and a month-long online survey was circulated by the directorate to all the borough's current foster carers. However, it was acknowledged that for both the survey and the Support Group meeting, this represented only a section of foster carers within the borough.
 - d) Theme 3: Best Promotion and Recruitment Practice – The Task Group extended an invitation to participate to Fostering Services regionally however, only one response was received.

- e) Recommendations' meeting – the Task Group met for a final time to consider the information it has been provided with and to agree the initial recommendations of the review.

2.2 The Task Group would like to place on record its thanks to officers from across the Council who contributed greatly to the coordination and delivery of the review:

- Linda Evans – Assistant Director, Children's Social Care
- Fiona Woods – Head of Fostering, Adoption and Provider Services
- Katherine Stanton – Marketing and Communications Manager
- Letiwina Gayakaya – Advanced Practitioner
- Laura Potter – Fostering Recruitment and Retention Officer

2.3 The Task Group would also like to thank Phil Watson (Foster Carer Recruitment Coordinator) and Karen Walley (Fostering Marketing Lead) from Liverpool City Council who contributed their time and expertise to the work of the Task Group.

Background

3.1 Fostering is one of several care options that offer children a home when they are unable to live with their birth family. According to national figures, every 20 minutes another child comes into care needing a foster family, with every day around 65,000 children living with 55,000 foster families. Around three quarters of children in care live with foster families. Children come into care for many different reasons – sometimes it is because of a parent's short-term illness or a temporary problem within a family that requires alternative care for the children; some have experienced domestic violence and/or witnessed drug and alcohol misuse; and others have been abused or neglected. Foster care can be a temporary arrangement that can be in place for anything from a few days to a few months, or even years.

3.2 There are different types of foster placements available:

- a) Short-term foster care: This is care for children for a relatively short period of time, anything from just one night up to 18 months, for a child aged 0-18 years old. These placements can sometimes be made in an emergency when it is not considered safe for the children to return home.
- b) Long-term foster care: This is care for children who will not be returning to their birth families. Often, long-term carers care for a child until adulthood when they can live independently.
- c) Short break care: This is care provided for children with disabilities who either they or their care giver require respite on a regular basis, overnight, for a weekend, or during school holidays. The Council's dedicated fostering website states that the authority is especially keen to hear from people who have the skills (or wish to develop the skills) to care for a child with disabilities on a full-time basis.

3.3 Foster carers may be approved to look after up to three children at once, unless exemptions are made or where there is a bigger group of brothers and sisters. If a foster carer has their own children, the local authority will consider the number and age of the children and advise on the number and age of fostered children a family can look after.

- 3.4 As well as providing day-to-day care for children and young people, foster carers are expected to advocate on behalf of the child, support their educational, health and social wellbeing, manage sometimes challenging behaviour, keep records, attend meetings and work with the wider team, as well as developing their own skills.
- 3.5 It is often important for fostered children to maintain links with their birth family through regular 'contact' meetings. Foster carers play a significant part in making this happen.
- 3.6 All foster carers once approved receive a minimum allowance of £250 to cover the cost of looking after the children in their care. Those foster carers who undertake training will be remunerated on a sliding scale to a maximum of £520 if they are caring for a young person aged 16 years and over. When compared to other local authorities regionally, allowances paid in St Helens are viewed as competitive and in some instances higher.
- 3.7 Some foster carers are approved specifically to look after members of their own family, such as grandchildren, nieces, or nephews. These foster carers are known as family and friends foster carers (kinship), or connected foster carers
- 3.8 In August 2021, the Social Market Foundation predicted that in England, there will be a recruitment deficit of 25,000 foster care families by 2026. There currently is no local or national data available to measure the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on foster carer recruitment and retention. Additionally, *The Fostering Network* predicts the pandemic will have increased the need for more fostering households to ensure there is sufficient capacity to make the best matches for children. This will need to be reviewed as the pandemic's impacts are still being understood.

Fostering in St Helens

- 3.9 The Task Group heard that the Council's Foster Service team currently comprised a Head of Service; a Service Lead; two Team Managers; two Advanced Practitioners; twelve Social Workers; a Recruitment and Training Officer; and allocated business support. The key operational areas of the service include:
- The recruitment of foster carers
 - Completing initial Viability Assessments and Single Assessments of both mainstream and connected carers
 - The completion of court directed assessments including stability for Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Order
 - Matching children with foster carers
 - Providing supervision, support and training to both groups of carers
 - Direct involvement in permanence planning for children and matching when considering the long-term placement of a child or young person with a specific foster carer
 - Oversight and co-ordination of the Foster Care Panel
 - Management of allegations
- 3.10 As of December 2021, there were 186 children within the Council's in-house fostering service. Of these, 82 (44%) are placed with mainstream carers, and 104 (56%) are placed with connected carers. Within the cohort of children and young people placed with mainstream carers, 19 have been long-term matched, and of those placed with kinship carers 50 are long-term matched. Within both groups' placement stability was considered to be strong.

- 3.11 Information on the current demand for placement was provided and is included in the below Table 1.

Month	Residential	Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA)	In-house Fostering	Total
April	5	1	3	9
May	4	6	3	13
June	4	10	2	16
July	5	8	1	14
August	3	7	3	13
September	2	4	1	7
Total	23	36	13	72

Table 1 – Current demand for placements

Table 1 above refers to the placements requested during the period April to September 2021 and should not be seen as an indicator of the number of children becoming looked after. It should also be noted that of those requests made for a residential placement, these are largely children and young people already in residential care for whom an alternative placement is sought. In addition, the data relating to in-house placement provided does not include children placed with temporarily approved or newly approved kinship carers.

- 3.12 The impact of agency placements on Council budgets was provided to the Task Group (table 2):

	Budget 2021/22 (£)	Forecast Outturn 2021/22 (as at Sept 2021) (£)	Forecast Pressure / (Underspend) 2021/22 (£)	Average annual care placement cost 2020/21 (£)
External Residential	10,269,000	11,107,907	838,907	205,347
External Foster Care	5,389,000	5,657,289	268,289	41,750
In house Foster Care	2,586,000	2,336,572	(249,428)	26,569
Kinship Care	1,550,000	1,684,359	134,359	15,030
Other Costs	3,328,000	3,730,781	402,781	
TOTAL	23,122,000	24,516,908	1,394,908	

Table 2 – Impact of agency placements on budgets

- 3.13 Table 2 provides a breakdown of the current placement costs. These figures detail the cost by placement type namely external residential, external foster care, in-house foster care, kinship care. Other costs refer to those children who are subject to Court Orders which include Residence Orders, Child Arrangement Orders, Special Guardianship Orders, young people remaining with their foster carers subject to Staying Put and those children who have been adopted but for whom an adoption allowance was agreed.
- 3.14 Based solely on cost, table 2 highlights in-house and kinship/connected foster care is significantly less expensive than external foster care and external residential care. To put this into context, the average cost of an in house foster carer per child per annum is £26,569 and the average cost of a residential placement per child per annum is £205,347.
- 3.15 The demand for in-house foster placements is greater than the number of placements available. In order to ensure that all children and young people who become looked after are offered the opportunity to be cared for within a family (if that meets their needs and is safe to do so) there will need to be a continued focus on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Given the rate of recruitment challenges, consideration should also be given to opportunities to collaborate regionally and to explore the establishment of formal arrangements with external providers.

Current Practice in St Helens

- 3.16 In its first meeting under Theme 1, Members of the Task Group received a presentation from officers which provided an overview of the current recruitment process in St Helens:
- a) An enquiry is received in through either telephone, messenger, email, recommendation or through a social worker. A response is provided with 24 working hours which includes a telephone call and information sent by email or post.
 - b) The Recruitment Officer completes the initial enquiry either during the call or if requested at a time to suit the enquirer. The initial enquiry is shared with the dedicated Recruitment Social Worker, either on the same or next working day.
 - c) Subject to screening, a home visit is arranged. This is dependent on the availability of the enquirer but is aimed to be completed within 7 days. 'Screening' refers to the refers to the initial discussion that takes place with an applicant, often by telephone, which includes the basic requirements to become foster carer such as accommodation and impact of previous convictions/known risk.
 - d) Stage 1: A place is reserved on the Skills to Foster training session, which is held every six weeks, and includes the completion of statutory checks such as Disclosure and Barring (DBS); medical; financial assessments; references from employer / personal / ex-partners;
 - e) Stage 2: This is the home study part of the assessment and is commonly known as the Form F assessment. If completed alongside the stage 1 elements, then the two stages could be completed with 16 weeks.

- f) The final stage is for approval to be sought at the Foster Care Panel, which is currently held every two weeks.

3.17 The Task Group heard that in those instances when enquirers do not respond to attempts to initially contact them, their enquiry remains active with correspondence, including information about the service, sent asking them to contact the service again at any time. After this, any enquirer will remain on a dormant list with a newsletter sent out to maintain contact

Findings

4.1 As set out in Section 2 (Method of Investigation), the Task Group held a variety of meetings both with Council officers (internal and external), current foster carers, as well as a survey of current foster carers. The findings of the Task Group are as follows.

Marketing Methods

4.2 In the Theme 1 Background Information meeting, the Task Group received details of how fostering was promoted within the borough. Given the competitive market, particularly from Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs), the Council offered a comprehensive marketing approach. This allowed the Council to reach the widest pool of potential new foster carers, or to encourage those who have left the Council's in-house service to return.

4.3 The current marketing approach included:

- Digital – online, social media, newsletters and lead generation
- Print media through the local press
- Out of Home advertising e.g., on bus shelters, billboards, supermarket / shopping centre digital screens
- PR / Media e.g., coverage of celebration events, for example, for long service
- Internal stakeholder promotion – staff incentive scheme, and through the Council intranet
- Information sessions, both face-to-face and online
- Actively participating in national schemes such as Fostering Fortnight

4.4 The Task Group questioned whether there was a mechanism used to evaluate the effectiveness of online advertising and how the advertising budget is spent on social media / Google. Officers responded that the service took an evidence-based approach to its marketing strategies and approaches, based on measures of success. This resulted in the most effective methods of fostering recruitment being prioritised and marketing budgets allocated appropriately. The Group also heard how online / social media marketing could be targeted to specific groups who could have an interest in fostering. The effectiveness of online promotion could also be tracked and evaluated via analytical tools – something which couldn't be measured with a newspaper advert.

4.5 The Task Group attended a meeting of the Virtual Foster Carers Support Group during October 2021. One of the key questions that Members asked was for current foster carers thoughts on how fostering was currently promoted and how it could be improved. The

number of foster carers in attendance at the group was low (14 foster carers), although it was noted that the group was representative of mainstream foster carers and connected foster carers with varying levels of service and experience.

- 4.6 Foster carers attending the support group commented that whilst acknowledging it was hard to measure, in their experience word of mouth was fundamental to the successful recruitment of foster carers and that establishing personal contacts and relationships was key. Foster carers present were hesitant around the use of social media as a means of promotion fostering, due to the potentially hostile/abusive nature of comments that can be posted by some users.
- 4.7 Foster carers commented that promoting fostering in settings used by families, such as sports clubs, children’s play areas and leisure centres, was potentially an inexpensive way of reaching a wider target audience – including those who were already parents. At the time of meeting, it was noted that the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions could present more opportunities for in-person events to be held. However, given rising case numbers seen in December 2021, the Task Group acknowledged that in-person events may not be possible given the potential for increased restrictions, but that these opportunities should be explored at a suitable time.
- 4.8 Both officers from St Helens and Liverpool City Council and current foster carers told the Task Group that when holding in-person events, potential applicants wish above all to speak to current foster carers and not necessarily social workers or elected members. This allows potential applicants to ask the questions that only foster carers themselves can answer (e.g., what is the day-to-day experience of fostering; what support you get from the Council; what is the assessment process like etc.).
- 4.9 The Task Group also considered how fostering could be promoted in workplaces where caring is carried out professionally e.g. hospitals, education and other care settings. The Task Group agreed that senior leaders in such workplaces and those with pastoral responsibilities in education settings specifically should be approached to promote fostering within their workplace and network. The Task Group also noted that the same request should also be made of Elected Members in terms of promoting fostering during their work in the community and online.
- 4.10 Whilst accepting that online marketing was an important part of recruitment and could be targeted with analytics used to assess effectiveness, the Task Group felt strongly that a hybrid approach to marketing, including both online and in-person events, was necessary to the successful recruitment of foster carers. The Task Group commented that consideration should continue to be given to events and campaigns that align to the different ages and needs of children who need fostering within the borough.

Challenges and Barriers to Recruitment

- 4.11 In its first meeting under Theme 1, Members of the Task Group received a presentation from officers which provided an overview of the challenges to the recruitment of foster carers. This included:

- a) The ongoing significant challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the reported impact that regional fostering providers (both statutory and non-statutory) were reporting, including a significant fall in the number of enquires
- b) The socio-economic profile of St Helens borough, and the impact upon the financial position of households and the requirement for suitable accommodation (i.e. the need for a spare room)
- c) Competition from Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs)
- d) The recruitment of suitably skilled and experienced foster carers to meet the needs of older children and young people, and those with identified complex behaviours or health conditions.

- 4.12 The Task Group also considered some of the potential or perceived barriers to fostering that could prevent a resident from enquiring about fostering. This included perceptions about foster carers' age; sexuality; gender; health; relationship status; other responsibilities such as care or work responsibilities; support networks; and even a spent criminal record.
- 4.13 The Task Group acknowledged that whilst there are serious criminal offences or serious health conditions which would prevent a resident from fostering, future marketing campaigns should ensure that any potential or perceived barriers are addressed directly and explicitly (e.g. I am LGBT+ - I can foster. I am retired - I can foster. I am single – I can foster. I am out of work – I can foster etc).
- 4.14 The Group was informed that responsibility for the recruitment and retention of foster carers sat within the Fostering Team, supported by a dedicated recruitment and training officer; a supervising social worker with a reduced caseload; and a team manager with lead responsibility for recruitment. Underpinning this, there is also support from the Corporate Marketing and Campaigns team. Officers questioned if this offered the same level of response when compared to external providers and other local authorities who have formed a collaborative approach.
- 4.15 The Task Group also heard that it was important that enquiries were responded to within a timely manner, with the appropriate level of information shared following an enquiry.
- 4.16 Foster carers also commented that while they understood that the assessment process must be stringent to ensure that only appropriate applicants progressed to Panel, the process was viewed as daunting and intense. Their view was that this could, in some cases, put off applicants and prevent fostering being recommended to others. Connected carers commented that following the assessment, they could often be left feeling raw and vulnerable due to the depth of discussion about their early life.
- 4.17 Regarding the use of 'foster care champions', officers commented that there was potential for this role to support those going through the assessment process. An example was discussed whereby an enquirer could be directed to a current foster carer Champion to provide further information on and reinforce the importance of the assessment process, from the applicant viewpoint.

- 4.18 The Task Group heard from Liverpool City Council's Foster Carer Recruitment Co-ordinator, who was a foster carer for the local authority but was also employed on a part-time basis. They explained in detail their role, particularly in addressing some of the challenges and barriers to recruitment of foster carers. Given the need to increase the number of foster carers, the Task Group would like the department to explore the potential for a similar remunerated foster carer recruitment role to be established.
- 4.19 Whilst discussing the barriers and challenges to recruiting new foster carers, the Task Group also explored the current practice of gathering information to inform service development from those enquirers who do *not* progress to assessment. The Group agreed that this information should be used by the department when considering its fostering campaign and marketing materials.
- 4.20 Members of the Task Group queried whether the Council collaborated and established partnerships with other neighbouring authorities to improve foster care recruitment. The Task Group was advised of a recently established regional fostering group for which this was a primary focus and that this could, subject to approval, lead to opportunities being explored in this area. The Task Group agreed that partnerships and collaboration were important to ensure effective recruitment and requested that further consideration and updates be provided on how partnership and collaboration opportunities had been explored.

Retention of Current Foster Carers

- 4.21 Throughout the work of the Task Group, it became apparent that whilst the recruitment of foster carers was of vital importance, it was also crucial to retain those existing foster carers, and this became a key focus of the Task Group.
- 4.22 One key aspect of retaining current foster carers is ensuring that they have the necessary support and training to fulfil what can be very difficult responsibilities, especially when issues arise out of office hours. This includes ensuring that additional training is given for those children and young people with challenging behaviours.
- 4.23 Another key element of retention is ensuring foster carers feel valued. The Task Group identified two components central to this. Firstly, regularly seeking and valuing current foster carers' feedback by sharing good practice, responding openly and swiftly to areas of concern and feeding back action to foster carers. This would ensure that foster carers 'voice' was heard.
- 4.24 A second component of demonstrating how we value the contribution and work of foster carers is by ensuring that they are recognised in an appropriate manner. This includes long-service visits to the Mayor's Parlour (which had previously taken place before the Covid-19 pandemic) and nominations for an Honours List award. It was agreed that a strategy for this was needed.
- 4.25 Throughout the work of the Task Group, Members heard that remuneration was not a primary motivator for people wishing to foster. However, the Task Group acknowledged that being able to afford to foster was undoubtedly a key issue. The Group heard that at present, the Council offered a fee payable to those individuals recommending someone to become a foster carer. This fee is made once the applicant is approved and is for the sum of £100.

However, the Task Group heard examples of other incentives offered by local authorities regionally as a part of their offer to foster carers. The Task Group would like the Council, within its annual review of the Foster Care Payment Guide, to consider greater incentives that could help improve existing foster carers to encourage others to foster.

Foster Carers Survey

- 4.26 During October 2021, an online survey was circulated to foster carers. Of a total of 149 foster carers, approximately 38 (25.5%) responses were received, and not all responders answered every question set out within the survey.
- 4.27 When asked what would encourage and incentivise more people to consider fostering, the following responses were provided:
- a) A better understanding of the challenges facing children in care;
 - b) More information about the assessment process;
 - c) More information about how Council staff and partners can support foster carers;
 - d) Ensuring that fostering remains financially do-able, including potential discounts off council leisure facilities or council tax discounts;
 - e) Increased recognition for foster carers;
 - f) Greater networking opportunities.
- 4.28 However, the Task Group noted that of those who responded to the survey, a proportionally high number (over 80%) were recruited prior to 2020, and a significant number were connected carers. Since 2020, there have been several changes to the Fostering Service. These include the investment within the Fostering Service to create the dedicated Recruitment and Training officer; the fostering website had been considerably reviewed; and the development of a Recruitment and Retention Strategy.
- 4.29 The Task Group recognised for many of the foster carers who participated in the survey, the above changes would not have been in place at the point at which they applied to become a foster carer. However, the Task Group stressed that this did not lessen their reported experienced and Members remained extremely grateful for those foster carers who had completed the survey. The Task Group welcomed the responses to support the findings of this report and agreed that the results would be passed on to the Fostering Service.
- 4.30 The Task Group felt that it would be beneficial to ensure the voice of foster carers was strengthened to ensure their views and experience informed the service even more than at present. The group would welcome consideration being given to this
- 4.31 Overall, the Task Group commented that the responses indicated that there is good practice, with some areas for improvement and strengthening. As such, the Task Group recommends that there be an end-to-end review of the recruitment process, with a focus on those foster carers recruited in the preceding 12-24 month period.

Conclusions

- 5.1 Members welcomed the openness and honesty from all involved in the work of the Task Group and recognised that increasing the number of foster carers was a challenge.
- 5.2 The key focus of the Task Group's work centred on the recruitment of foster carers. Members explored themes which covered marketing, the initial enquiry stage, and support through the assessment process. A second part of the Task Group's work looked at the retention of existing foster carers, which included how foster carers are remunerated, valued, supported and trained. Section 6 of this report sets out this Task Group's recommendations.

Marketing

- 5.3 Considering the wide variety of evidence and experience provided to Members, whilst accepting that online marketing was an important part of recruitment and could be targeted with analytics used to assess effectiveness, the Task Group stressed that a hybrid approach to marketing, including both online and in-person events, should continue. In all methods of marketing, the Council should continue and strengthen the message that a wide range of people can foster as set out in 4.12 above. The Council should ensure that this is strengthened in marketing campaigns so that perceived barriers and myths to foster care are addressed.
- 5.4 The Task Group would welcome the department continuing to regularly review the Fostering in St Helens website for currency, accessibility and sufficiency of up to date information.
- 5.5 Given the need to increase the number of foster carers, the Task Group wishes the department to explore the potential for a remunerated foster carer recruitment role be established, similar to the role in Liverpool's foster carer recruitment service. The Task Group commented that it was key that the role should be filled by an existing foster carer.
- 5.6 In order to understand why people choose not to foster, the Task Group wishes the department to continue to seek feedback from those people who make an enquiry to foster and subsequently withdraw. This information should be then used to inform and improve the recruitment process.
- 5.7 The Task Group agreed that senior leaders, in workplaces which include or provide care, should be approached and requested to promote fostering to staff and parents and carers within their workplaces and networks. Where possible, for example in education, senior leaders with specific responsibilities for pastoral care should be approached. Similarly, Elected Members should be asked to promote fostering during their work in the community and online. To assist with this, the Task Group would welcome training opportunities for elected members on how to do this effectively, including use of social media.
- 5.8 The Task Group agreed that partnerships and collaboration were important to ensure effective recruitment and requested that further consideration and updates be provided on how partnership and collaboration opportunities have been explored.

Initial Enquiry

- 5.9 The Task Group continues to stress that enquiries are responded to within a timely manner with the appropriate level of information shared. The Task Group would welcome consideration as to the staffing resources available for enquiry responses from within existing directorate resources.

Assessment Process

- 5.10 The Task Group accepts that the assessment process needs to be stringent to ensure only appropriate potential carers process to Panel. However, the Group requests reassurance that the options available for follow-up wellbeing support after assessment are considered, to include the support available from other more experienced foster carers (referred to as 'foster care champions').

Retention of Current Foster Carers

- 5.11 Throughout the work of the Task Group, it became apparent that whilst the recruitment of foster carers was of vital importance, it was also crucial to retain those existing foster carers, and this became a key focus of the Task Group. Therefore, the Task Group requests that consideration should be given to ensuring that the views of existing foster carers are regularly captured and acted upon by the local authority to ensure that the service continues to improve and meet their needs.
- 5.12 Whilst recognising that the Council already provides continuous training and development opportunities to foster carers, the Task Group would welcome further consideration of high-quality training opportunities being offered to ensure that foster carers are fully prepared to deal with difficult behaviours, especially during out-of-hours. The Task Group would welcome consideration of the therapeutic support (available as a part of the Edge of Care offer) being offered to foster carers where appropriate.
- 5.13 The Task Group agreed that Council recognition of the invaluable contribution foster carers make to improving the lives of children and young people requires further consideration. The Task Group would welcome the production of a strategy document to set out how recognition can be given, including a variety of ways in which the Council can recognise good service and nominations to the Honours List.
- 5.14 The Task Group requests that options for greater incentives be explored regarding remuneration for foster carers, and that a cost benefit analysis be completed for a financial payment made to referrers (including foster carers) when they recruit a new foster carer as a part of the annual Foster Care Payment Guide.

Recommendations

The Task and Finish Group recommends the following:

- 6.1 That an end-to-end review of the foster care recruitment process is carried out by the Children's Services department, with a focus on those foster carers recruited in the preceding 12-24 month period. This review should address the range of topics raised in the report, including the consideration of the staffing resources available to respond to enquiries – within existing directorate resources for the forthcoming financial year.
- 6.2 That the Council's Fostering Marketing and Communications Strategy continue to be reviewed annually and strengthened where necessary. This should include the following:
 - a) Ensuring that the hybrid approach to marketing continues to address the potential myths around barriers to fostering by promoting that anyone aged over 21 can foster, including older people, and regardless of sexuality, gender, race, disability and other issues as set out in 4.12.
 - b) Feedback from both current foster carers, and those who make an enquiry to foster but subsequently withdraw, is gathered used to shape the Marketing and Communications Strategy and recruitment process
 - c) Appointing 'foster care champions' from within the existing pool of experienced foster carers to attend online and in-person events
 - d) Continuing to keep the Fostering in St Helens website under regular review
- 6.3 Opportunities be explored for 'foster care champions' to support those applicants going through the foster care assessment process.
- 6.4 That consideration be given to ensuring that the views of existing foster carers are regularly captured and, where appropriate, acted upon by the local authority, to ensure that the service continues to improve and to meet the needs both of foster carers and children and young people.
- 6.5 That the department explore the potential to appoint a remunerated Foster Carer Recruitment Co-ordinator from existing St Helens' foster carers, similar to the role in Liverpool City Council's foster carer recruitment service.
- 6.6 That in workplaces where caring is carried out professionally, for example in education, hospitals and other care settings, senior leaders, should be approached to promote fostering within their local networks / workplaces. In education, this would involve those with specific pastoral responsibilities.
- 6.7 That Elected Members of this authority be requested to promote fostering during their work in the community and online. To assist elected members to do this effectively, the Task Group would welcome introductory training on the how best to market key messages, including use of social media.

- 6.8 That collaboration opportunities with neighbouring authorities be explored to raise the profile of fostering and encourage effective recruitment.
- 6.9 To demonstrate how much we value the work of our foster carers, a strategy document be produced which sets to set out how recognition can be given, including a variety of ways in which the Council can recognise good service and nominations to the Honours List.
- 6.10 That within its annual review of the Foster Care Payment Guide, that the Council consider greater incentives that could impact upon the recruitment and retention of foster carers. This includes options being explored regarding remuneration for foster carers, and a cost-benefit analysis for a financial payment made to referrers when a new foster carer is approved.
- 6.11 That in addition to the training already offered, further consideration of high-quality training opportunities should be given to ensure that foster carers are fully prepared to deal with difficult behaviours, especially during out-of-hours. The Task Group would welcome consideration of the therapeutic support (available as a part of the Edge of Care offer) being offered to foster carers where appropriate.
- 6.12 That the current out of hours support available to foster carers be reviewed to consider the need for a dedicated response.
- 6.13 That an update on the recommendations of this Report is brought back to the Children and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee during the 2022/23 municipal year.

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers Task Group – Recommendations

Rec No	Recommendation	Responsible Officer	Agreed Action and Date of Implementation
1	<p>That an end-to-end review of the foster care recruitment process is carried out by the Children's Services department, with a focus on those foster carers recruited in the preceding 12-24 month period. This review should address the range of topics raised in the report, including the consideration of the staffing resources available to respond to enquiries – within existing directorate resources for the forthcoming financial year.</p>		
2	<p>That the Council's Fostering Marketing and Communications Strategy continue to be reviewed annually and strengthened where necessary. This should include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Ensuring that the hybrid approach to marketing continues to address the potential myths around barriers to fostering by promoting that anyone aged over 21 can foster, including older people, and regardless of sexuality, gender, race, disability and other issues as set out in 4.12. b) Feedback from both current foster carers, and those who make an enquiry to foster but 		

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers Task Group – Recommendations

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	<p>subsequently withdraw, is gathered used to shape the Marketing and Communications Strategy and recruitment process</p> <p>c) Appointing ‘foster care champions’ from within the existing pool of experienced foster carers to attend online and in-person events</p> <p>d) Continuing to keep the Fostering in St Helens website under regular review</p>		
3	Opportunities be explored for ‘foster care champions’ to support those applicants going through the foster care assessment process.		
4	That consideration be given to ensuring that the views of existing foster carers are regularly captured and, where appropriate, acted upon by the local authority, to ensure that the service continues to improve and to meet the needs both of foster carers and children and young people.		
5	That the department explore the potential to appoint a remunerated Foster Carer Recruitment Co-ordinator from existing St Helens’ foster carers, similar to the role in Liverpool City Council’s foster carer recruitment service.		

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers Task Group – Recommendations

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6	That in workplaces where caring is carried out professionally, for example in education, hospitals and other care settings, senior leaders, should be approached to promote fostering within their local networks / workplaces. In education, this would involve those with specific pastoral responsibilities.		
7	That Elected Members of this authority be requested to promote fostering during their work in the community and online. To assist elected members to do this effectively, the Task Group would welcome introductory training on the how best to market key messages, including use of social media.		
8	That collaboration opportunities with neighbouring authorities be explored to raise the profile of fostering and encourage effective recruitment.		
9	To demonstrate how much we value the work of our foster carers, a strategy document be produced which sets to set out how recognition can be given, including a variety of ways in which the Council can recognise good service and nominations to the Honours List.		

Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers Task Group – Recommendations

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10	That within its annual review of the Foster Care Payment Guide, that the Council consider greater incentives that could impact upon the recruitment and retention of foster carers. This includes options being explored regarding remuneration for foster carers, and a cost-benefit analysis for a financial payment made to referrers when a new foster carer is approved.		
11	That in addition to the training already offered, further consideration of high-quality training opportunities should be given to ensure that foster carers are fully prepared to deal with difficult behaviours, especially during out-of-hours. The Task Group would welcome consideration of the therapeutic support (available as a part of the Edge of Care offer) being offered to foster carers where appropriate.		
12	That the current out of hours support available to foster carers be reviewed to consider the need for a dedicated response.		
13	That an update on the recommendations of this Report is brought back to the Children and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee during the 2022/23 municipal year.		

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