



ST HELENS
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Children and Young People Services Committee

09 January 2023

Report Title	Recruitment & Retention of Foster Carers Task Group (Progress 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	Fiona Woods Head of Fostering, Adoption and Provider Services fionawoods@sthelens.gov.uk
Contact Officer	Karl Allender Scrutiny Support Officer karlallender@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 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 was formally agreed at a meeting of the CYPS Scrutiny Committee on 31st January 2022 and is submitted to Cabinet for response as per the Council's constitution.

2. Recommendation for Decision

The Children and Young People Service Scrutiny Committee is recommended to:

- (i) **note the update Action Plan attached at Appendix 1 that sets out the progress made against the recommendations from the Recruitment and Retention Foster Carers Task Group.**
- (ii) **provide feedback in relation to the current recruitment and retention activity**

3. Purpose of this report

- 3.1 This report provides Children and Young People Services Committee with an update on the actions agreed in response to the recommendations of the Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers Task Group, which was agreed by Scrutiny Committee on 31st January 2022 and the current recruitment and retention activity underpinned by the recommendations.

4. Background/ Reasons for recommendations

- 4.1 At the beginning of 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 who required foster care. In response Members committed to holding a Task Group to explore the recruitment and retention of foster carers within the borough.
- 4.2 The Task Group report and recommendations was approved by the CYPS Scrutiny at a meeting held on the 31st January 2022. As per the Council's constitution the report was presented to the CYPS Scrutiny Committee at its meeting in July 2022.
- 4.3 Subsequently there has been considered focus upon the Task Group report and the recommendations agreed. To progress a number of key recommendations a further report was submitted to the Senior Leadership Team in September 2022 seeking approval to a number of

identified incentives to support recruitment activity and to approve the realignment and development of the service to meet the priority of increasing and retaining foster carers, which was approved.

- 4.4 The recommendations of the Task Group and the approvals granted in September have been considered and a project team developed to ensure oversight and scrutiny of both workstreams. This activity is reported to the Director of Children's Services weekly.
- 4.5 The project team has developed a Project Plan with key workstreams which are as follows;
- A review and redesign of the current fostering website.
 - To develop on an understanding of marketing activities and best approaches to ensure resources are target efficiently.
 - To develop a login for foster carers and children which will provide their basic details but also links to support, training opportunities and key messages.
 - To target recruitment activity including face to face events and virtual.
 - The engagement of partner agencies to promote fostering through their websites and through the provision of promotional material if appropriate for areas accessed by the public.
 - To further develop the relationship with St Helens R.F.C
 - To plan and implement a St Helens Council recruitment week in January supported by foster carers and concluding with a celebratory event.

Fostering Service and Sufficiency

- 4.6 Under section 22G of the Children Act 1989 local authorities must take reasonable steps to ensure (in so far as is possible) that there is sufficient accommodation in the local area to meet the needs of children who are looked after. To meet this duty St Helens operates a Fostering Agency.
- 4.7 The Fostering Services Regulations 2011 and National Minimum Standards (NMS) provide a clear framework for fostering service providers on how services should be delivered, how foster carers should be assessed and what support carers can expect to receive. Ofsted refer to both the NMS and regulations when inspecting fostering agencies.
- 4.8 The Fostering Service has experienced a reduction in the number of people seeking to become foster carers and a growth in the number of Children requiring foster homes. The recently published Independent Review of Social Care (McAllister 2022) highlighted a nationwide shortage of local authority foster carers. Our position reflects the national picture. This is detrimental in terms of children being accommodated away from their families, support networks, and schools, and in terms of increased cost to the Local Authority.
- 4.9 The projected placement costs for the financial year 2022/23 for young people placed with external residential and IFA providers is approximately £19.6m. This figure has risen year on year, and the departmental budget pressure in respect of Looked After Children is currently approximately £2m.
- 4.10 In response to rising placement costs several local authorities within the region have reviewed their current offer in terms of allowances, support, and incentives to be able to recruit more foster carers. They have also introduced or are seeking to introduce therapeutic fostering schemes, where foster carers are given more support and training so they will feel confident in working with

and accommodating young people with higher levels of need. The primary aim of these schemes is, to reduce the need for young people to be placed in high-cost residential placements. Instead, the scheme would enable children to be placed within a family closer to or within their community.

Decrease in numbers of carers

Type of foster carers	2021/2022	2022/2023
Mainstream carers	71 households (103 carers)	64 households (103 carers)
Kinship carers	67 households (89 carers)	59 households (92 carers)
	Total 138	Total 123

- 4.11 The number of households has reduced, but the number of overall carers has increased, this is because carers are married or co-habiting.
- 4.12 At present there are 480 children looked after (November 2022) of these 310 are placed with foster carers: 172 in house (92 kinship¹ arrangements and 80 mainstream), and 138 placed with Independent Fostering Agencies.
- 4.13 During the same period last year there were: 467 children looked after with 333 placed with foster carers, 195 in house (113 kinship arrangements and 82 mainstream) and a 138 with Independent Fostering Agencies. Based on the 138 children placed in fostering households provided by Independent Fostering agencies the local authority would need an additional 70 fostering households to take these children back in house.
- 4.14 During the period 1 April 2022 to 1 August 2022 there have been 53 enquiries. Of the enquiries received 43% did not respond to any attempts made to contact them by email or telephone call. The second largest reason for withdrawing - 29% is work commitments and a further 28% is the result of negative information received following checks undertaken including references which would preclude them for becoming foster carers.
- 4.15 There are four fostering applications currently at assessment stage which are due for consideration by the Fostering Panel in January 2023.
- 4.16 When compared to the same period last year the enquiries have reduced from 61 to 53. Although the initial visits for the same period last year have reduced from 4 to 3 the number of assessments has increased from 1 to 4, this figure has increased following the request from 2 foster carers currently with Independent Fostering Agency's seeking to transfer to the local authority and one further enquiry received a foster carer with an Independent Fostering Agency.
- 4.17 The review of foster carer resignations found several distinct reasons why carers had stopped fostering. In summary of the 24 de-registrations during 2021/23, 12 were connected carers and 3 of which withdrew, 2 of which the children/young people returned home and 3 offered continued support under Staying Put. Of the 12 mainstream carers there was no one primary reason but 3 offered permanence via Special Guardianship Order, 2 retired and 2 ceased due to undertake caring responsibilities for older/younger relatives.

5. National context

¹ Kinship care is the care given to a child who's parents are unable to provide the care and support for a child and this responsibility is taken on by a family member or other connected adult.

- 5.1 Findings by the Fostering Network (2012) report that across the UK approximately 9,265 fostering households are required to ensure all children and young people who cannot live with their family are provided with the care and support they need within their own community; this is particularly the case for sibling groups. Currently there are over 70,000 children living with 56,000 foster families in the UK and the number of children looked after is continuing to rise.
- 5.2 A survey of foster carers conducted by FosterWiki has highlighted the serious financial pressures on the sector as the cost-of-living crisis continues to mount. This echoes the findings of the Fostering Network State of the Nation 2021 survey of over 3000 foster carers, demonstrating that the allowances paid do not meet the full cost of looking after a child. In addition, they have highlighted the unprecedented rises, in recent times, in the cost of living with increases in inflation, rising energy caps and National Insurance contributions.
- 5.3 The average cost of external fostering placements has risen to £854 a 2% increase since March 2021. Recent rounds of uplifts to the indicative contract price for new placements has brought the weekly average for a child aged 5-10 years to £876.74.

6. Targeted Recruitment

- 6.1 The DCS chairs a task and finish group to oversee improvements within the service. This is currently focusing on the recruitment of foster carers and developing and implementing the marketing strategy across the council and wider partnerships. This will include the provision of information via a weekly bulletin which is distributed to all educational establishments, parents' evenings and open days. It is intended that this approach will be rolled out to include all partners such as Health and Police with support formally requested from the St Helens Safeguarding Partnership Board to promote fostering at every possibility. In addition, we have been successful in gaining the support of Regeneration partners as part of the Council's wider Social Value Strategy.
- 6.2 Following review of the recruitment activity it was agreed the existing budget is increased from £25k to £58k to ensure further advertising, including promotional materials are displayed on Council vehicles, bins, and other suitable publications.
- 6.3 St Helens as per other local authorities has in place a Refer a Friend Scheme with a payment made to foster carers once an applicant has been approved of £100. However, this is below regional payments made with most schemes offering over £500. To date whilst this scheme has been in operation no claims have been made it is therefore agreed to increase this amount to £500 the lowest rate offered both regionally and nationally, in the hope this will incentivise more people.
- 6.4 Currently the Department continues to rely upon the availability of Independent Fostering Agencies to offer placements to children and young people due to the lack of available in-house carers. Whilst this is not as costly as residential options it still represents a budget pressure and does not consistently enable young people to remain within the borough. Increasingly these placements are some distance away from the communities that children and young people identify with, causing pressure upon their contact with family and access to education.
- 6.5 We are aware that other neighbouring Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies offer a range of incentives to attract foster carers, and these include access to health care, lump sums for children remaining in their care for specified periods of time and access to leisure facilities.
- 6.6 To attract new foster carers who live in the borough, the proposal was agreed to offer them a 'golden handshake' of £500 after the first six months of them taking placements.

- 6.7 Foster carers are required to promote positive healthy lifestyles as part of their wider role and do so by accessing opportunities within the local community. We currently pay for gym passes for all young people aged 15 years and above. There is no current provision for children under the age of 15yrs. As part of the Council's wider priority of tackling obesity with its ambition of encouraging all residents to lead a healthier lifestyle by 2026, all fostering households will be offered the opportunity to access free leisure facilities

7. Development of a Specialist Fostering Service

- 7.1 In recognising of the challenges in recruiting experienced and skilled individuals to become foster carers for those children identified as having experienced trauma or presenting with more complex or challenging behaviours, we are looking to further develop our own in-house offer. The focus being upon young people who have experienced placement breakdowns and whose next placement option would be a residential provision. We will identify a cohort of young people already in residential care who could 'step down' into a fostering placement
- 7.2 There are a range of different schemes around this methodology. Which ensure an enhanced model of support, including 24/7 telephone support and an increased number of supervisory visits with access to a psychologist or therapist.
- 7.3 Establishing the scheme would require the recruitment of 10 specialist foster carers who will be supported to provide care, for up to 9 children/young people who would otherwise be placed within an external residential or IFA provider, The recruitment of 10 foster carers would enable the retention of one vacant placement to provide built in respite from foster carers trained in the model. Foster carers would be required to provide intensive support to the children/young people for a period of up to 48 weeks. During this period assessments would be undertaken to consider the permanence plan for young person which could include remaining with the foster carer long-term.
- 7.4 To create the scheme the establishment will be increased by one additional supervising social worker who will manage this part of the service from assessment through to support.
- 7.5 The specialist foster carers will be paid a fee of £600 in addition to which they would receive the age-related allowance for the child, which given the age range of the young people being placed would be an additional £180 or £220 per week. If a placement ends unexpectedly or the foster carer is not matched with a child/young person following approval, it will be expected that the foster carers are used as part of the Edge of Care Offer to provide additional support.

8. Revised Fostering Structure Recommendation

- 8.1 The Fostering Service has recently restructured. The new structure is to ensure there are two areas of specialism around recruitment and retention with dedicated managers and social workers assigned to each area. The recruitment team is now a satellite team just concentrating on recruitment of carers.

9. Conclusions

- 9.1 The current cost to the local authority of those children placed in external residential care settings is approximately £13.5m per year, and the average annual placement cost £254k. Based on current costs, reducing the number of children/young people in residential care and placing them with specialist foster carers would reduce care costs.

10. Legal Implications

- 10.1 N/A

11. Community Impact Assessment (CIA) Implications

11.1 Should the proposal be agreed a Community Impact Assessment will be required.

12. Social Value

12.1 The proposals offer opportunities for members of the community to participate within the development of the provision by means of becoming a therapeutic foster carer.

13. Sustainability and Environment

13.1 N/A

14. Health and Wellbeing

14.1 The proposals would increase the opportunities for children and young people to remain within a family environment and within their own communities strengthening their own sense of identity and promoting their health and well-being.

15. Equality and Human Rights

15.1 N/A

16. Customers and Resident

16.1 The proposal increases the likelihood of children and young people remaining in-borough and maintaining their place within their family and the wider community.

17. Asset and Property

17.1 N/A

18. Staffing and Human Resource

18.1 The proposal would create new opportunities for existing staff and represents growth. All documents and proposals will be subject to full HR review and advice.

19. Risks

19.1 The risks relate to our ability to recruit foster carers and therapeutic foster carers. The recruitment of all foster carers would require a targeted recruitment campaign learning from good practice models available regionally and consideration of any current in-house foster carers who may wish to be considered for the specialist role.

20. Policy Framework Implications

20.1 These proposals are being made as part of the wider Sufficiency Strategy.

21. Appendices

21.1 Appendix 1 Recommendations