



Fostering Annual Report

Cambridgeshire County Council & Peterborough City Council

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| Period Covered | 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022 |
| Date Completed | May 2021 |
| Name / position of author | Sue King Service Manager Practice Standards and Household Review |

Report Context

The Fostering Services Regulations 2011 require that the Fostering Service provides annual written reports on the management, outcomes and financial aspects of the Local Authority's Fostering Service. This report provides an overview of the activity of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fostering Service for the last financial year, April 2021 to March 2022 and covers the activity for both Local Authorities, reflective of the shared fostering service.

Executive Summary

The reporting period of 2021- 2022 represents the first full year of operations for the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fostering Service, which launched on 1 December 2020.

Some of the core roles and functions of our fostering services have continued to remain separate, for example Cambridgeshire staff supervise Cambridgeshire foster carers, and Peterborough staff supervise Peterborough carers. There is a

combined recruitment and assessment function, supervision and support function and a combined dedicated team that undertakes independent household reviews and monitors practice to ensure quality and compliance with the Fostering National Minimum Standards.

The report outlines the development of the key areas of the service and the progress made in each.

During the year, the Fostering Service has experienced the lifting of the Coronavirus restrictions, and the impact of this is referenced where relevant.

Cambridgeshire County Council

In this reporting period, the service recruited 12 new fostering households.

As of 31 March 2022, there are a further 13 new fostering assessments in progress. This work will carry over into 2022/23.

In this reporting period, 35 fostering households resigned from fostering leaving an overall net loss of 23 households.

3 fostering households transferred to an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) from Cambridgeshire.

On 31 March 2022 of the 415 children and young people in care living with Foster Carer, 228 (55%) were living with in house carers who were supported by the fostering service (all fostering types) as opposed to 45% living with Independent Foster Agencies.

There was a total of 77 assessments of Special Guardianship applicants completed in the reporting period.

There was a total of 8 Private Fostering assessments completed in the reporting period and 11 school holiday boarding were received.

Peterborough City Council

In this reporting period, the service recruited 15 new fostering households.

As of 31 March 2022, there are a further 6 new fostering assessments in progress. This work will carry over into 2022/23.

In this reporting period, 12 fostering households resigned from fostering leaving an overall net gain of 3 households.

1 Foster Carer household transferred to an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) from Peterborough.

On 31 March 2022 of the 244 children and young people in care living with Foster Carers, 139 (58%) were living with in house carers who were supported by the fostering service as opposed to 42% living with Independent Foster Agencies.

There was a total of 45 assessments of Special Guardianship applicants completed in the reporting period.

There was a total of 2 Private Fostering assessments completed in the reporting period.

Audits and inspections

Fostering Service Self- Assessment

The Fostering Service carried out a self- assessment in March and April 2022.

It highlighted the following areas of positive progress:

- All Foster Carer annual reviews were in date by January 2022.
- Foster Carers consistently reported feeling well supported by knowledgeable fostering staff.
- Foster Carer participation in the development of services had increased in a variety of ways including the appointment of Recruitment Ambassadors to support recruitment activity for new foster carers and in training focus groups.
- Some Foster Carers Support Groups returned to in person following the lifting of Coronavirus restrictions, which was well received. The service will continue to offer a hybrid model of Support Groups as this model supports more carers to attend.
- Preparation training for Special Guardians was designed and implemented. The training is supported by a Special Guardian who attends every course which has received positive feedback from attendees.
- An extensive and wide-ranging Training Programme has been designed. It included delivery by internal staff and external providers, virtually and in person to meet the learning needs of as many Foster Carers as possible.

The areas where the service needs to improve are:

- Recruiting more Foster Carers: improving sufficiency of local foster homes for local children and developing a strong pipeline of confident foster carers who meet the care needs of our children and young people in care.
- Supporting and developing existing Foster Carers to expand their offer and enable them to care for our most vulnerable children and young people through extended offers of training, support from clinician services and more widely from relevant support services.
- There are insufficient Foster Carers able to care and provide short breaks to children and young people with disabilities.
- Developing the business intelligence systems to support better data collection and performance monitoring.
- Working more cohesively and collaboratively with our partners and stakeholders to ensure a streamlined and comprehensive service which benefits the children in foster care and Foster Carer households.

Ofsted Inspections

Cambridgeshire children's services received a focused visit from Ofsted in March 2022. Inspectors looked at the Local Authority's arrangements for children in need and children subject to a protection plan. Inspectors considered the experience and progress of children, the application of thresholds, step-up/step-down arrangements, and children subject to edge of care or pre-proceedings support. There were no comments relating directly about the Fostering Service.

Peterborough received a focused visit from Ofsted in August 2021 when inspectors looked at the Local Authority's arrangements for Children in Care.

Ofsted considered that the quality of matching children to Foster Carers is an area of strength, and staff make best use of limited options. Foster Carers make informed decisions when they are asked to care for children, are highly committed to them and encourage and support children to engage in a wide range of social and leisure activities. Leaders value the role of carers and understand that they are key to improving children's lives and experiences. Carers are well supported and are active and influential in recruitment and marketing campaigns run by the authority.

Summary Fostering Households Year End

Cambridgeshire

The Fostering Service was supporting 181 Fostering Households which included:
 150 Mainstream households (Professional Foster Carers)
 12 Link households (short breaks for children with disabilities)
 17 Connected Carer households (fully approved Kinship Carers)
 2 Supported Lodgings households

Peterborough

The Fostering Service was supporting 94 Fostering Households which included:
 83 Mainstream households (Professional Foster Carers)
 1 Link household (short breaks for children with disabilities)
 7 Connected Carer households (fully approved Kinship Carers)
 3 Supported Lodging households

Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention

The 2021-22 Recruitment, Marketing and Communication strategy outlined the key aims and priorities for the Fostering Service in respect of increasing the number of Foster Carers, their diversity, skills and experience. The key priority was to recruit carers to look after teenagers and children and young people with disabilities. The following media campaigns took place during this reporting period:

| | |
|------------|-------------------------------------|
| March 2021 | LGBTQ+ Week |
| May 2021 | Foster Care Fortnight |
| July 2021 | It's the little things campaign |
| Sept 2021 | Faces of Fostering campaign |
| Oct 2021 | Sons & Daughters Month |
| Nov 2021 | November emergency fostering appeal |
| Dec 2021 | Christmas Wishes campaign |
| Jan 2022 | New Year New You campaign |
| March 2022 | LGBTQ+ Week Private Fostering |

Monthly Information Sessions for prospective enquirers have been held virtually either in the early evening or at lunch times. Virtual Information Sessions proved to be more successful in terms of attendance than the in-person events which the service previously held.

The Recruitment Team (Front Door to the Fostering Service) has 3 full time Recruitment Officer posts, which includes a new Senior Recruitment Officer post whose role it is to support the consistency and the development of the team.

Fostering Recruitment Activity

| Activity | Annual figure CCC 2020/21 | Annual figure CCC 2021/22 | Annual figure PCC 2020/21 | Annual figure PCC 2021/22 |
|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Enquiries | 329 | 239 | 161 | 78 |
| Initial Visits | 101 | 68 | 60 | 24 |
| Application forms received | 79 | 26 | 26 | 11 |
| Attended Skills to Foster | 47 | 22 | 16 | 14 |
| End of year assessments in progress (Form F commenced) | 10 | 13 | 10 | 6 |
| Approved | 25 | 12 | 6 | 15 |
| Number of resignations and de-registrations | 19 | 35 | 6 | 12 |
| Net gain | 6 | -23 | 0 | +3 |

Cambridgeshire

The conversion rate from enquiry to assessment this reporting period was 11%

The conversion rate from application forms sent out to prospective carers and returned was 43%

Peterborough

The conversion rate from enquiry to assessment in this reporting period was 14%

The conversion rate from application forms sent out to prospective carers and returned was 57%

For 2021-2022, the Fostering Service set aspirational targets to achieve a net gain of 45 new fostering households across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, specifically, 25 fostering households plus 6 Link Carers in CCC and 10 fostering households plus 4 Link Carers in PCC. This target was not achieved and in the current national climate following the impact of COVID-19, it is recognised that it was also not realistic.

Other Local Authorities are reporting a similar picture in terms of low net gains of new fostering households and an increase in the reporting of net losses. It is believed that this is partly due to the uncertain economic climate during the height of Covid-19 but also several Foster Carers who had been planning to retire have brought their plans forward or having taken on the care of older relatives, no longer felt they could foster.

We know there continues to be a need to recruit more carers for children aged 11 years and older, carers who can look after brothers and sisters keeping them together and children with more complex needs and disabilities. We also know that we need to challenge ourselves and our carers to maximise utilisation of vacant beds to ensure that children and young people do not move to live in externally purchased provision at a distance from their support networks.

The engagement and retention of carers has been a priority in the last year and remains so for the coming year.

In this reporting period the Fostering Service has

- Developed a Retention Working Party involving staff and Foster Carers to explore how Foster Carers can be actively supported to stay with the Fostering Service and to understand the barriers that they experience in fostering.
- Developed a mechanism to identify all Foster Carers who have indicated that they were considering leaving the service. Retention visits are carried out to discuss the Foster Carer's specific concerns and to seek a resolution where

possible. This individualised approach was successful in retaining 50% of the carers who were visited.

- An Exit questionnaire was introduced during the year. Foster Carers who decided to leave the service were requested to complete a questionnaire which provided valuable information on areas for improvement or development.
- Exit interviews were also conducted and Foster Carers told us what they were unhappy about. This included being unhappy about the limited number of children they were approached to care for (in the under 5-year age band), dissatisfied with the level of support provided in their first year of fostering and changes to fostering fees and allowances. Foster Carers also provided positive feedback to the service including compliments about the level of support they had received from fostering managers, the training offer especially in the first year of fostering and the level of communication between the service and Foster Carers.
- The service collated and monitored all reasons given by Foster Carers who choose to leave the service so that it can address these, where it can. In Cambridgeshire, the main reason given was retirement due to age and the second most common reason given was family reasons, including the impact of fostering on birth children. In Peterborough, the most common reason given was family and other commitments and the second reason given was retirement due to age. Other reasons given which relate to both Local Authorities were ill health, children in preferred age ranges not being available to foster (0-4 year olds), moving area, following an investigation and dissatisfaction with foster carer fees.

Core functions of the Fostering Service

The Fostering Service's aim is to provide a high-quality responsive child-centred service in relation to its core functions and to recruit new local Foster Carers from within our diverse communities that reflect the needs of local children and young people in care.

The service prepares applicants through training to be able to manage with the range of issues that Foster Carers face when looking after children. The service assesses foster carer applicants for the following types of care arrangements: Mainstream/Professional Foster Carers, Connected Persons Carers, LINK Carers, Supported Lodgings Carers and those who offer Private Fostering. The service undertakes comprehensive assessments and checks to ensure that prospective carers are suitable to foster and able to carry out their role.

We supervise, support and develop the skills and knowledge of Foster Carers so that they are able to provide the highest standards of safe, therapeutically minded

family-based care to our children and young people in care so that their outcomes are improved.

The types of Foster Care offered include; Short Term/Time Limited, long-term; parent and child; short breaks LINK care for children with disabilities; respite, emergency, supported lodgings and PACE.

PACE: The Local Authority has duty to provide accommodation to children and young people under the age of 18 years who have been arrested and charged in relation to a criminal offence. PACE stands for Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 which placed this duty. PACE transfers take place in order to limit the amount of time children and young people are required to spend in police custody with the young person being transferred to Local Authority accommodation overnight before being presented to court the following morning.

The service also supports young people to stay with their foster carers beyond the age of 18 years in a 'Staying Put' arrangement if this is considered the best plan for the young person. This is not a regulated fostering activity, and the young person, having left care, no longer has a social worker and the Foster Carer no longer has a Supervising Social Worker, but the young person continues to receive support, advice and guidance from their Personal Advisor who is employed by the Local Authority.

Safeguarding - allegations & standards of care

Allegations against Foster Carers, outcomes and timescales

| Allegations against foster carers | CCC | PCC |
|--|-----|-----|
| The number of allegations against foster carers made by fostered children | 3 | 1 |
| The number of allegations against foster carers made by other sources | 5 | 1 |
| | | |
| The number of children who have made allegations against their foster carers | 3 | 1 |
| The number of foster carers who have been subject to allegations | 8 | 2 |
| Information about the categories of alleged abuse | | |
| Physical abuse | 5 | 0 |
| Sexual abuse | 0 | 0 |
| Neglect | 1 | 1 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Emotional abuse | 2 | 1 |
| Information about the outcome of investigations of allegations | | |
| Concern(s) resolved - no further action | 3 | 1 |
| Continued monitoring for an agreed period | 1 | 0 |
| Concern remained, referred to fostering panel to review foster carer approval | 4 | 1 |
| Timescale for investigations | | |
| less than 21 working days | 1 | 1 |
| 22-30 working days (4 - 6 weeks) | 4 | 1 |
| 31-50 working days (6 - 10 weeks) | 1 | 0 |
| More than 50 working days (> 10 weeks) | 2 | 0 |

10 fostering households were subject to allegations during this reporting year, which was lower than the previous year where there were 15 fostering households subject to allegations.

All investigations are carried out by Fostering Reviewing Officers who are independent of the Supervision Teams, providing objectivity to the process. Following an allegation, a Foster Carer's suitability to continue to foster will be considered by the Fostering Panel and Agency Decision Maker.

Being subject to an allegation or concern process can be very distressing for a Fostering Household and in recognising this, in this reporting year the service secured an offer of free and confidential emotional health and well-being advice to Foster Carers via the Councils' Employee Assistance Programmes. This support offer can be accessed directly by Foster Carers.

Compliments and complaints

The following are a selection of the compliments received by the service.

| Source | Summary of compliments about foster carers |
|------------------------|--|
| IRO | Fostering 4 children from same family allowing them to grow up together, showing resilience and advocating for the children. |
| Young person | They were like a mum and dad to them, helped them to stop smoking, drinking and getting their life back on track. |
| Children's Social Work | Stuck by the young person and went above and beyond in providing a bridge to their next foster home. |

| | |
|---|--|
| Team Manager | |
| Child's social worker | Thank you as their support and organisation enabled family time to go ahead with the children being kept as the focus. |
| Concerning staff type | Summary of compliments about our staff from foster carers |
| Training team | They hold the staff in high regard for providing a training programme that delivered despite the pandemic. |
| Fostering Social Worker | They find her extremely supportive and would have struggled without her and she protects them from themselves. |
| Fostering Social Worker and Service Manager (Supervision & Support) | Exceptional support through a difficult time, and staff showing that they genuinely cared about her situation. |
| Assessing Social Worker | Warm and professional approach when discussing sensitive issues. |

Summary of complaints and outcome

| COMPLAINANT TYPE | SUMMARY OF COMPLAINT | OUTCOME |
|---------------------|--|------------------|
| CCC | | |
| Foster Carer | Foster carer dissatisfied with decisions about child's care plan | Partially Upheld |
| Relative | Unhappy with care of child by foster carer | Partially Upheld |
| PCC | | |
| Foster Carer | Foster Carer unhappy about support from their social worker | Upheld |
| Foster Carer | Used incorrect finance policy | Upheld |
| Foster Carer | Decision in relation to fostering enquiry | Not completed |
| Former Foster Child | Foster carer attitude | Partially Upheld |

Of the six complaints made, two were upheld, three were partially upheld and none were not upheld. One is not yet completed.

The service always seeks to speak to the complainant directly to understand the complaint fully, and to seek early resolution of any concerns. Learning from complaints is taken back to the service to improve practice.

Foster Carer training and development opportunities

The year saw a return to face-to-face training as the Covid restrictions lifted, with a hybrid delivery model being used. The Training survey that was carried out showed that Foster Carers value having a range of course delivery options. Virtual learning remains the most popular choice, with Foster Carers stating that this fits more easily with their lives when taking children to school and nursery, is greener and less expensive for them.

In this reporting year, 1205 course places were attended across 95 one day courses, and two, two-day courses. This comprised of courses from a range of sources internally delivered by our training lead and staff, from within the Local Authority by our Virtual Schools and Youth Offending Service (YOS) and from partner agencies such as CASUS (Children and Adolescence Substance Use Service). We also commissioned specialist courses which included first aid, courses on trauma, therapeutic parenting, autism, child development, gender and sexuality.

The feedback the service received confirmed that our Training Programme was very well received with many courses full and waiting lists in place for some.

E-learning was also offered to Foster Carers with 707 Foster Carers enrolling in ME Learning courses with 367 courses being completed and 2904 e-learning modules being completed via the Foster Carer Training Hub.

Special Guardianship Carer preparation training was developed and introduced from September 2021 with 47 prospective Special Guardians attending the training during this reporting period. A Special Guardian co facilitates the course alongside the service, which has been very valued by attendees.

A 'Next Steps' training framework has been developed for new Foster Carers which supports them to understand their role and responsibilities, encourages their engagement, and develops their understanding of the needs of foster children and the support available to them. The programme is co-delivered internally by the Fostering Service and Reunification and Placement Stability Service (RAPs).

Carer consultation, engagement and support

Support Groups have operated for both Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Foster Carers throughout the year with face-to-face groups resuming when Covid-19 restrictions allowed. These groups are organised and run by the service in collaboration with Foster Carers. Alongside the local based Support Groups, a Support

Group for Foster Carers looking after children aged 0 – 5 years has offered the opportunity to explore age specific training needs in an informal setting and a specific Support Group is also provided for Foster Carers who offer short breaks to children with disabilities.

All new Foster Carers are linked with a Mentor who is an approved Foster Carer prior to their approval to offer peer support in the early stages of their fostering career.

Events have taken place throughout the year for fostering households to meet with each other and staff including day trips to Wicksteed Park and Christmas parties both of which were well attended.

The Assistant Director has held 'Coffee and Cake' virtual sessions which are an informal opportunity for Foster Carers to meet with Senior Managers and is a forum where they can raise questions and hear about developments in the service and wider children's services.

Senior Managers meet regularly with the Chairs and Vice Chairs of the Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association and Peterborough Foster Carer Community and representatives also attend their respective meetings. This provides an opportunity to hear about what is working well for Foster Carers and areas that need to be addressed or developed.

During the year Foster Carers were consulted on the additional allowance payments which included mileage and payments for emergency clothing. This consultation concluded on 1 April 2022. Following further feedback from Foster Carers, expectations around the amount of pocket money provided to children and respite payments to Foster Carers remain under review.

A Foster Carer Survey was launched in the summer of 2020 which was supported by the established Foster Carer forums in both Local Authorities: Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association and Peterborough Foster Carer Committee (now Peterborough Foster Carer Community). Foster Carer engagement with the survey was good and responses received have been considered by the service when developing a three year Fostering Strategy.

Foster Carers continue to be invited to formal Council meetings of the Corporate Parenting Committee in Peterborough and the Corporate Parenting Sub Committee in Cambridgeshire to represent Foster Carers and ensure their views are heard by Elected Members.

Bimonthly Foster Carer Newsletters from the Service provide an informal mechanism to update fostering households about any changes in staffing, new developments in the Service, training and support.

In addition to Foster Carer Ambassadors supporting recruitment and marketing activity, a Foster Carer Training Forum was established to support the training team to consider the needs of Foster Carers and hear their views on the programme and other aspects of training. Foster Carers were instrumental in developing a revised and streamlined Personal Development Plan for Foster Carers which is now in use.

Fostering Panel

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fostering Panels have continued to operate separately and virtually during this reporting year. The business of the Fostering Panel has remained the same, with both considering Foster Carer's suitability to continue to foster or to be Foster Carers, post allegation reviews, noting resignations, extensions of temporary approval and changes to Foster Carer terms of approval.

In Cambridgeshire, 24 Fostering Panels sat during the year and in Peterborough 16 Fostering Panels sat. Panel members have continued to receive medical advice and legal advice when required. The Fostering Panel Adviser role was held by Stuart Stapleton for both Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Additional panels were convened to prevent drift and consider cases in a timely way. No panels were cancelled due to lack of quoracy.

In Cambridgeshire Richard Holland is the Panel Chair and Elaine Barry was appointed to Vice Chair.

In Peterborough Mick Cunningham is the Panel Chair and Fernley Copping is Vice Chair.

Panel training days were held for Peterborough on 6 October 2021 and for Cambridgeshire on 11 October 2021.

Appraisals for the chairs and panel members have been carried out during the year in line with requirements.

Fiona Van Den Hout, Head of Service for Fostering and Supervised Contact acted as Agency Decision Maker for the Fostering Panel.

Heads of Service Sam Nour, Samantha Howlett, Fiona Van Den Hout and Myra O'Farrell acted as the Local Authority's Nominated Officers for regulation 24 temporary fostering arrangements.

Management arrangements

The management of the service was carried out by Lou Williams, Service Director Children's Services across both Local Authorities until February 2022 when Nicola Curley was appointed Interim Service Director for Children's Services.

Ricky Cooper, Assistant Director for Fostering, Regional Adoption and Specialist Young People's Services was appointed in the reporting year and has overall responsibility for the Fostering Service.

Fiona Van Den Hout, is the operational Head of Service for the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fostering Service. Fiona was supported by three lead Service Managers during this reporting year, who in turn were supported by their Team Managers as follows:

Recruitment and Assessment:

Service Manager - Anita Hewson

Team Manager – Jo Laur

Team manager – Jenni Woodcock

Team Manager – Tasalla Shaiyen

Supervision and Support:

Service Manager - Despina Kaoura

Team Manager- Amanda Carter (interim for Sharyl Acheampong)

Team Manager – Jayne Barrett McGrath

Team Manager – Mariepearl Camfield

Household Review & Practice Standards:

Service Manager - Sue King

Team Manager – Jenny Braddock (now Stuart Stapleton)

Operational team meetings for staff and managers have been held monthly and both Council's have virtually provided corporate support opportunities for staff including monthly wellbeing sessions and weekly briefings by Senior Council Leaders.

Children in Care participation and consultation

The Service works closely with the Councils Participation Teams who support children and young people in care to provide their views on specific topics via the Children in Care Councils and Care Leaving Forums. For example, the service consulted with on the Children's Guides for Fostering and included some of their artwork in the Guides. The Guides provide information to children and young people about living with Foster Carers and how to make a complaint if they are unhappy about the that they are receiving.

The annual Children in Care Awards are held annually by each Local Authority and is an event that the whole fostering household is encouraged to attend and is supported by staff from the Fostering Service.

The service attends the Participation Group and has collaboratively developed a service Participation Plan.

Young Recruiters have helped to interview applicants for social care roles, and Young Trainers have helped deliver training to carers and staff. The Young Trainers received excellent feedback from prospective Foster Carers.

Feedback has been sought from children and young people in care about their experience of living with in house Foster Carers as part of the Foster Carer's annual review process.

Private Fostering

Local Authorities have a statutory duty to monitor the safety and wellbeing of children and young people living in Private Fostering arrangements. Private Fostering arrangements are made between parents or carers who have parental responsibility for that child and another individual in order that they can take on care of their child for a period of longer than twenty-eight days. This arrangement should be reported to the Local Authority for a safeguarding assessment and monitoring.

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough local authorities have established private fostering processes in place. The number of Private Fostering arrangements has continued to be affected by Covid-19 with language schools remaining closed throughout 2021-2022.

In Cambridgeshire, six notifications were received for mainstream children with two Private Fostering Arrangements being assessed as unsuitable. Notification was received from one boarding school of eleven children remaining resident over the Christmas school holidays.

In Peterborough, two notifications were received for mainstream children with two Private Fostering Arrangements being assessed as being unsuitable.

There were no Private Fostering notifications from Language Schools or other schools who take international students in either Local Authority.

At the end of March 2022, in Cambridgeshire there was one Private Fostering Arrangement in place and in Peterborough there were five.

The Private Fostering Communication Strategy was reviewed during this reporting period following the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions.

Connected Persons

Connected Persons is often better understood as Kinship or Family and Friends care which is when a child or young person cannot live with their birth parents, and they are looked after by extended family members or others with whom they have a relationship or a connection. Most Connected Persons are related to the children they look after, and the majority are grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings or other family members, but some are family friends.

The Local Authority has a duty to consider placing a child or young person (if care is needed) with a Connected Person rather than into foster care or residential care as part of legal proceedings and or childcare planning. The Fostering Service undertakes assessments of Connected Persons in order to recommend to the Court whether the Connected Person is suitable to act as a Special Guardian and care for the child or young person throughout their minority. In such cases the court is able to issue a Special Guardianship Order to the Connected Person which gives them residency and overriding parental responsibility enabling them to be the decision maker for the day to day needs of the child or young person.

The Local Authority has a duty to submit a Special Guardianship Support Plan alongside the assessment which sets out the Local Authority's post order support. This may include financial support and/or therapeutic support.

The Fostering Service received 84 new referrals relating to Cambridgeshire children and completed 77 Connected Person's assessments and received 52 new referrals relating to Peterborough children and completed 45 Connected Person's assessments.

Service Priorities for 2022-2023

The Fostering Service is developing a three-year strategic plan to address the sufficiency need for local family-based care in both Councils. The strategic plan is built on four building blocks which includes the following priorities:

Recruitment

We will focus our marketing and recruitment activity primarily on attracting new professional carers who are able to offer family-based care for children and young people aged 5 to 18 years old, carers who have the capacity in their home to offer to care for brothers and sisters so that they can remain living together and Foster Carers who have the skills to offer short breaks (Link Care) for children with disabilities.

We will also focus on expanding our cohort of Foster Carers who offer emergency and PACE care for children who need a local foster home in an unplanned way so that they can remain close to their family, friends and school.

We also recognise that we need to do more to increase the diversity of the Foster Carer Community so that it better reflects the needs of our children and young people. A Diversity Strategy will be developed early in the next reporting year to support marketing and recruitment activity alongside a Diversity Survey which our existing Fostering Community will be asked to complete to help the service to better understand our current carer demography for example ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability (hidden and/or otherwise).

We will continue to develop our Unique Selling Points as a not for profit, locally based Fostering Service to attract more applicant Foster Carers who want to foster for their Local Authority and provide family-based care for children and young people from within their local communities.

Reputation

We recognise the uncertainty that our Fostering Community has experienced over the last several years and that we need to continue to build the trust and confidence of our Foster Carers. Through our continued work with the respective Foster Carer forums, we will continue to look at ways of engaging our local Fostering Community in building and improving our service.

We will maintain a Customer Focus that is at the heart of service delivery, cultivating a culture of good customer service within the organisation and within our workforce by setting clear Customer Service Standards such as:

- We will aim to respond to telephone calls, emails and other requests within 24 hours, even if it is to let you know that we are going to need longer to respond to your request

- We will promptly pay you your weekly allowance and expenses on time and where we are unable to do this, we will let you know the reasons why and when you will expect to receive your payment
- Alongside standards as set out in Regulations we aim to progress your enquiry and application to Foster within four months and fast track applications sooner if prospective foster carers are suitable to foster children from specific high needs cohorts of where approved Foster Carers are wanting to transfer from another agency to us

We know there is much to do in supporting and changing the narrative of some of the perceptions about Foster Carers and in how they are treated, valued, cared for and respected. We will develop an Engagement Strategy alongside our Foster Carers which will include:

- Developing the role of Fostering Champions within the wider Children's services
- Developing our brand identity and defining and embedding our Customer Service Standards
- Improve the understanding of the role of and the challenges that Foster Carers experience to enhance relationships between the service, the wider service and the Fostering Community
- Celebrate compliments and learn from complaints
- Continue to engage meaningfully in participation activity with children and young people and use respectful language for example, we will not use 'placement' to refer to either children or where they live.
- Managers and Leaders will role model customer service principles, so staff feel confident and competent to use the same principles when interacting with Foster Carers and we will support Foster Carers to adopt the same principles when interacting with our staff. By walking the talk, we can achieve the best possible outcomes for children and young people

Resilience

We will continue to build resilience in our Foster Carer Community to enable and equip them to care for the children and young people that we need them to and continue to improve on the number of children living with in house Foster Carers.

- We will continue to develop our wrap around support offer to Foster Carers and with our Foster Carers engage with the wider children's services to learn from unplanned and distressing endings in care arrangements to reduce these in frequency
- We will continue to review the training offered to Foster Carers through feedback and surveys
- We will focus on the training needs of our staff, identifying specialists training and access to resources so they have the right tools to do the job

- We will continue to make every effort to recruit to vacancies in our workforce in a timely way so that caseloads remain manageable, and staff have the time they need to support applicant and existing Foster Carers

Retention and Reward

Foster Carers are the Local Authorities' most valuable resource for children and young people in care and are integral to the wider workforce of the Council and Children's Services.

- We will continue to annually review and monitor payments made to Foster Carers and will make all efforts to remain competitive in offering a fair and transparent payment scheme that is in line with market rates, including the cost of living
- We will encourage the need for Foster Carers to be viewed as having a professional status within the wider professional network and Council
- We will continue to embed our retention activity through retention visits and a 'Let's Talk, before you walk' interview, providing a solution focused approach to breaking down any barriers or challenges Foster Carers are facing. When Foster carers do choose to leave us, we will continue to consistently gather feedback to learn from their experience and develop our practice, disseminating this learning within the wider Children's service as necessary
- We will continue to streamline paperwork Foster Carers are required to complete and enhance our offer of developing technologies to make the fostering task easier where it relates to the recording and sharing of information remotely
- We will develop a quarterly feedback mechanism to be utilized by the Foster Carer forums demonstrating how the voices of Foster Carers have been heard and acted on where necessary
- To continue to run a series of events including regular support groups that evidences to Foster Carers that they are valued and respected by the organisation
- We will celebrate the achievements of Foster Carers at every opportunity

Completed by:

Sue King Service Manager: Household Review and Practice Standards Team

28.06.22