

Cambridgeshire Foster Carers' Association and the Fostering Service report July 2023

To: Corporate Parenting Sub Committee

Meeting Date: 12 July 2023

From: Cambridgeshire County Council Fostering Service

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Outcome: The Committee is being asked to note the work of the Cambridgeshire Foster Carer's Association and the Fostering Service.

Recommendation: The Sub-Committee is recommended to note the contents of the report.

Officer contact:

Name: Despina Kaoura
Post: Service Manager
Email: despina.kaoura@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Tel: 07834 698143

Name: Anita Hewson
Post: Head of Service
Email: anita.hewson@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Tel: 07825 907406

Member contacts:

Names: Councillors A Bradnam and M Atkins
Post: Chair/Vice-Chair
Email: anna.bradnam@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Michael.atkins@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Tel: 01223 706398

1. Background

- 1.1 This is an update to the Corporate Parenting Committee from the Cambridgeshire County Council Foster Carer's Association and the Fostering Service.
- 1.2 As of 1st June 2023, there are 169 registered Foster Carers to Cambridgeshire County Council.
- 1.3 This report has been prepared to update the Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee on the continued participation activity and collaborative working between Cambridgeshire County Council's Fostering Service and the Cambridgeshire Foster Carers.

2. Main Issues

Overview of activity

- 2.1 Cambridgeshire County Council's Fostering Service continues to work in partnership with the Foster Carer's Association to ensure that Foster Carer's views are understood and to support service development.
- 2.2 Foster Carers representatives on the Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association (CFCA) are: Tracey Stephenson (Chair), Kevin Arrowsmith (Vice Chair), Anna Williamson (treasurer), whilst Stuart Currie, Julian Ayres, Nikki Flowers, Jen Madams and Barbara Hall continue as Association members in support of the Chair and Vice Chair and committee business.

Fostering Working Groups – Progress Briefing

- 2.3 The Fostering Service strives to develop and improve the service we deliver to Children in Care of the Local Authority (LA) and the Foster Carers who provide this care on behalf of the LA. The Fostering Service recognises the wealth of fostering and life experience, knowledge and understanding Foster Carers come with. They have a great understanding of children who come into the care system through caring for children within their homes as part of their families. The Service values the individual skills which Carers bring with them to support the Foster Carer Community. The Service works closely with the members of the Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association (CFCA) and the Peterborough Foster Carer Committee (PFCC) but also with the wider fostering community throughout the year to ensure the voice and views of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Foster Carers are heard and are central to plans for service development.
- 2.4 The current working groups we have are:
 - Recruitment Ambassador Working Group
 - Retention Working Group
 - Mentoring Working GroupAmongst other joint working to meet the needs of the service and the children we care for.

- 2.5 The CFCA has identified that they would like to see changes to how we provide end of year financial annual statements for tax purposes (Foster Carers are self-employed). In response we have a meeting set up in July between the CFCA and the fostering service to progress this to ensure changes are in place for next year. In addition, we have also set up a monthly meeting (starting in July) with the CFCA and the fostering financial coordinator to ensure any issues of finance are addressed and to support any creative ideas.
- 2.6 The Service alongside the CFCA is starting to look at how we can ensure that the children who foster (birth children of Foster Carers) are best supported. Historically support groups have been run and this is something that will be further explored to whether this will meet the needs alongside other creative ideas.

Retention of Foster Carers

- 2.7 We continue to host a monthly Foster Carer Retention Working Group, with Foster Carers working alongside Social Workers, Recruitment Officers and Managers to consider issues related to the retention of Foster Carers. This quarter we have put focus on the 'Cost of Living' crisis and the impact this is having on Foster Carers, the retention of applicants in assessment and newly approved Foster Carers. We have also put focus on recruitment activity as part of retention, since the more involved Foster Carers are with the service, the better the retention of Foster Carers. The Foster Carer Community still awaits the increase in Foster Carer Allowances for 2023-2024 as per Government Guidance and awaits the decision of the Local Authority on this matter. Foster Carers choose to foster for a range of reasons, but financial gain is not one of them, however Foster Carers need to receive adequate financial support to meet the needs of the children they care for, and expenses incurred.
- 2.8 Foster Carers have told us that they sometimes find it difficult to discuss money issues or emotional wellbeing matters. We have responded by asking Supervising Social Workers to promote with Foster Carers that we want them to feel able to discuss these matters freely with us and without judgment. We have also written a range of articles within the Fostering newsletter on financial matters and emotional wellbeing to promote this further. Foster Carers also have access to the Employees Assistance Programme the same as staff employed by CCC.
- 2.9 We have expanded on our informal coffee mornings and lunches with Foster Carers leading on this activity, to ensure that new Foster Carers and existing Foster Carers have increased opportunities to socialise with one another, and to share their knowledge and skill. This activity also lessens any risk of Foster Carers feeling isolated within their role.
- 2.10 The Fostering Service together with the CFCA continue to bring together the two Local Authorities through events held throughout the year. There are also a range of working groups, that include both Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Foster Carers.
- 2.11 We continue to ensure that for any carer considering leaving the service, we have cultivated a system whereby managers are informed of this immediately. The Foster Carer is visited by a manager and an action plan is drawn up to ensure that any issues are managed in a

proactive and timely manner. This approach is working well, with fewer Foster Carers leaving the service due to being unhappy with the fostering service.

Recruitment Ambassadors

- 2.12 The Fostering Recruitment Ambassadors from within the Fostering Community continue to work alongside the Service supporting recruitment activity and raising the awareness of fostering in their communities using their wealth of knowledge and experience of the fostering task. We currently have three Cambridgeshire Ambassadors and three Peterborough Ambassadors. All of the Ambassadors meet with the Recruitment Team quarterly to review the progress of work undertaken and to consider new ideas.
- 2.13 The Ambassadors are very proactive in researching recruitment opportunities within their local area and they have continued to support with a range of events in their local communities. They have also been working on a new initiative for the summer months, which focuses on picnics in the park. The concept is that picnics will be arranged, and the Foster Carers will be encouraged to bring along their family and friends. This enables the Ambassadors and Recruitment Officers to engage with family and friends in an informal manner and provide information about fostering should they wish to apply. In addition, these picnics are also good for the retention of Foster Carers.
- 2.14 One of the Ambassadors and a Team Manager have started a monthly online Q&A session which is focused on providing fostering applicants and newly approved Foster Carers with the opportunity to come along to the session, ask any questions and learn from others. This session has proved popular, and the feedback has been very good.
- 2.15 Ambassadors are very involved with creating case studies and videos for promotional purposes. They are also supporting the Council through speaking to CCC employees about the Fostering Friendly working policy to encourage staff employed by CCC to consider fostering alongside their current paid job.
- 2.16 The Ambassadors are supporting with creating content for the Foster Carer newsletter. We feel that if the newsletter content is predominately led by Foster Carers, then it will be more engaging to other Foster Carers.
- 2.17 The Ambassadors are also promoting the Fostering Service across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough by assisting with the organisation of drop-in sessions which have a different focus to the established information evenings that we host. Instead, they are being advertised as 'Come and talk to a Foster Carer'. We feel that this type of event will be more appealing to the public, since most people who enquire are most interested in talking to a Foster Carer who is already in this role.
- 2.18 In addition to the Ambassadors, we are also widening our pool of Foster Carers that support generally with Fostering recruitment. There are several monthly meetings with Foster Carers who want to share their recruitment ideas with the Recruitment Team. Recently we ran a competition with Foster Carers to submit their recruitment ideas to be entered into a prize raffle. We had an excellent response to the competition and obtained some really good ideas for recruitment activity.

Mentoring Scheme

- 2.19 The Fostering Service continues to operate a peer Mentoring Scheme. The Mentors work in a structured one-to one relationship with a Foster Carer, with the main purpose being to support a Foster Carer to develop their knowledge, experience, skills and build on their confidence within the Fostering role.
- 2.20 In this quarter, there has been a significant change in terms of allocating Mentors to Mentees. Previously Mentors were allocated to new Foster Carers on approval, or where it was felt that providing a Mentor to a more experienced Foster Carer may be beneficial. However, we now allocate a Mentor to applicants during the fostering assessment. This provides the Mentor with the opportunity to develop a relationship with the Mentee prior to approval to enable the Mentee to be better prepared for the fostering role and for the Mentor to be able to actively support their Mentee when a child is placed.
- 2.21 We currently hold regular quarterly meetings (with a virtual option) with our Mentors to discuss any issues around mentoring and to provide updates regarding the fostering service. The fostering social workers who support the Mentors also give advice to colleagues regarding which Carers to refer and when to refer for a Mentor.
- 2.22 A Mentor's Handbook has been developed and disseminated to carers. We have arranged an in-person meeting for all the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Mentors at New Shire Hall on 27 June 2023.

Fostering Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Focus Group Update

- 2.23 The Fostering Equality, Diversity & Inclusion focus group (which includes staff and carers) raised requests for changes to Liquid Logic (the children's data base) to include gender / pronoun preference on demographics. The Liquid Logic change board considered the proposals, the system requires selection of either male or female currently as this data is required by Government, however, the system has now been adapted to give a Mx option. Liquid Logic is continuing to investigate ways of being able to express gender preferences within personal profiles.

Feedback Loop

- 2.24 The feedback loop sets out Foster Carer experiences, views and feedback gathered through the Foster Carer forums in Cambridgeshire (the Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association: CFCA) and in Peterborough (the Peterborough Foster Carer Community: PFCC). The feedback loop reflects Foster Carer voices from across the fostering community in relation to a range of topics they have chosen to provide feedback on or areas of specific challenge. For each new feedback theme there is a section for the Corporate Parent response which will be taken back to the Foster Carer forums, providing a transparent and open dialogue between Foster Carers, Children's Services, and the wider Council departments.
- 2.25 The Fostering Service continues to engage with Foster Carers via regular meetings with the Foster Carer Association/Community, Support Groups, the range of working groups discussed above in order to hear feedback directly from Foster Carers on what is working well and what Foster Carers feel needs to be considered or addressed not just by the Fostering Service but also the wider organisation relevant to caring for children in care. The

Fostering service will continue to engage the wider organisation to respond to the Feedback loop to continue to develop the service.

Changes

- 2.26 The Fostering Service is entering a period of transformation to enable it to be competitive within the commercial market and to support best practice. As part of this transformation, we will be looking at practice models which includes a network hub model to ensure the needs of our most vulnerable children and young people with complex needs and or whose behaviours challenge can be met in house. An example of such a network model is [Mockingbird](#) (there are other similar models that we are also exploring).
- 2.27 There have been some leadership changes within the Fostering Service with a change of Assistant Director and Head of Service. The new interim Service Director is Brian Relph, and he came into post on 26 June 2023. The new Head of Service is yet to be confirmed but it is anticipated that an interim will be in place at the point that the current Head of Service, Anita Hewson, leaves on 06 August 2023. Every effort will be made to ensure a smooth transition of the leadership team to ensure as little impact as possible to our Children in Care, Foster Carers and staff.

3. Alignment with the Council's Ambitions

- 3.1 Net zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2045, and our communities and natural environment are supported to adapt and thrive as the climate changes

There are no significant implications for this priority.

- 3.2 Travel across the county is safer and more environmentally sustainable

There are no significant implications for this priority

- 3.3 Health inequalities are reduced

There are no significant implications for this priority

- 3.4 People enjoy healthy, safe, and independent lives through timely support that is most suited to their needs

There are no significant implications for this priority

- 3.5 Helping people out of poverty and income inequality

There are no significant implications for this priority.

- 3.6 Places and communities prosper because they have a resilient and inclusive economy, access to good quality public services and social justice is prioritised

There are no significant implications for this priority

3.7 Children and young people have opportunities to thrive

- The Fostering Service ensures that children and young people are safe from harm and lead healthy lives. Children and young people are confident, resilient, thrive in their learning and engage positively and actively in their communities. The Fostering Service supports Care Leavers through the Staying Put Scheme and to learn independence skills.
- The Fostering Service ensures every Child gets the best start in life – with more children and young people in care finding permanent, safe and stable homes and support to care leavers to access a good, enhanced local offer that meets their health, education, housing and employment needs.

4. Significant Implications

4.1 None.

5. Source documents

5.1 None