

## Report from Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association

To: Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee

Meeting Date: 17 November 2021

From: Ricky Cooper, Assistant Director Fostering, Regional Adoption and Specialist Young People's Services

Electoral division(s): All

Forward Plan ref: n/a

Key decision: No

Outcome: This report has been submitted on behalf of the Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association and Fostering Service.

Recommendation: The Sub-Committee is recommended to:

- a) Note the content of the report
- b) Raise any queries they have with the lead officers

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# Summary

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fostering Service is making headway on achieving the strategic priorities set by Assistant Director, Ricky Cooper. The service is invested and committed to continual improvement and has developed the necessary culture of learning and challenge that will support this journey.

The Head of Service met with the Chair of the Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association (CFCA), Kevin Arrowsmith, on the 1st November 2021 to review and discuss the contents of the CFCA report and was pleased to note that the CFCA also recognised 'a collaborative drive to improve and implement measured changes that will benefit our children and young people, Foster Carers and others surrounding them'.

The service has reviewed and collated the themes from the Foster Carer Survey conducted in June and monthly meetings are taking place between the service leads and Chairs of the CFCA and Peterborough Foster Carer Committee where the themes will be discussed alongside other key initiatives and service developments.

## 1. Main Issues

### 1. Education

- 1.1. The Sub-Committee is reminded that the Virtual School conducted a survey of carers in November 2020 which was supported by the CFCA. Since the survey was completed, the CFCA has reported the following:
  - The CFCA has been invited to attend the Virtual School Management Board
  - The Chair of the CFCA has participated in Virtual School Personal Education Plan (PEP) audits, supporting the Virtual School's PEP improvement drive
  - The Virtual School has led a Foster Carer workshop where developments within 'Welfare Call' (the Virtual School recording system) have been made. The software company have reconfigured the reporting system to enable direct access for Foster Carers to current and historical PEP's, which be tested shortly.
  - The CFCA participated in a Pupil Voice working group with the Virtual School looking at how the pupil's voice can be better heard.
- 1.2. The Service released a refreshed Foster Carer Training Brochure in July which builds on the training courses offered by the Virtual School. The CFCA report confirms that the Virtual School is asking Foster Carers to be involved in the training it offers, so that the voice of the care experienced child and carer is brought into training delivered to schools.
- 1.3. The 2022 – 2023 Foster Carer Training Programme is in development and Foster Carers as well as other departments within children's services are working with the service to ensure our training offer meets the needs of all our Foster Carers.
- 1.4. The Virtual School has invited Supervising Social Workers and one of their fostering households to a conference in March 2022 which will focus on 'Pupil Voice'. The Chair of the CFCA will also be attending.

- 1.5. Foster Carers have raised their experiences of challenges with the transport to school arrangements in September for Children and Young People. The Head of the Fostering Service acknowledged that staffing pressures within the Children in Care teams did result in some children's request for transport being delayed and the Corporate Parenting Service will ensure that arrangements in September 2022 are organised well in advance.

## 2. Support to Foster Carers

- 2.1. The CFCA has raised that there is a need for a responsive out of hours support package for Foster Carers. In discussion with the CFCA Chair, the service confirmed that a review of the out of hours support line arrangements for Foster Carers, which is predominantly provided by Supervising Social Workers, is underway. The service has received feedback from Foster Carers as to how valuable they have found this resource which is in addition to the Council's Emergency Duty Team (also available to Foster Carers) which operates after office hours, seven days a week. The service's strategic direction is to have a combined support line offer across both Councils which is responsive and also sustainable for the service. The service aims to have this in place by December.
- 2.2. The CFCA raised that Foster Carers need more support in crisis situations. The service is focussing on the support offer to Foster Carers alongside the Children's Social Work Teams. The Stability Meeting process to support care arrangements when they are fragile has been reviewed by colleagues in Corporate Parenting so that the right support approach across the wider system is offered at the right time to carers. The service is also routinely exploring the circumstances behind care arrangements that end in an unplanned and often distressing way for children, to ensure that learning feeds into supervisions with staff and with fostering households.
- 2.3. The CFCA raised that Foster Carers need more support when subject to allegations. All Foster Carers who are subject to allegations are offered independent advocacy and advice through Foster Talk. However, in acknowledging that this process can be isolating and distressing, the service is also exploring with the CFCA and Peterborough Committee Chairs how the emotional health and well-being of Foster Carers can be better supported. Whilst ensuring the timely conclusion of the allegation process is a priority for the service, the service also considers that during this time Foster Carers would benefit from a more formal support offer from Foster Carer Mentors, and this will be included within the revised Mentorship Framework which the service will launch in November.
- 2.4. The CFCA would like more Foster Carers to share their experiences of looking after children with complex needs and behaviours at Support Groups. The service is reviewing all Support Group arrangements held in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough over the coming months and this will be considered as part of that review. A number of Foster Carers have said that they would be willing to share their experiences at Support Groups to provide advice but also to improve the confidence of carers. Progress in regard to this review will be discussed at the monthly meetings with service leads and Chairs.
- 2.5. The CFCA requested the service consider the therapeutic support for Foster Carers, particularly when care arrangements are fragile. Supervising Social Workers are trained in therapeutic parenting interventions and the service is piloting membership of the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting, which includes an offer of individual consultation

sessions to Foster Carers providing strategies, techniques, and advice. The service is also providing a six weekly Therapeutic Parenting course as part of its core training offer.

- 2.6. The CFCA raised that the matching of children to carers needs to be improved with more accurate information about a child contained within the information Foster Carers receive. In recognising this this is as an area for continual improvement, a working group is in progress to action improvements which includes attendance from the Independent Reviewing Service, Commissioning, children's teams and includes Foster Carer representation.
- 2.7. The CFCA has asked the service to review how risks associated with behaviours are identified and mitigated against in placement planning meetings and placement plans for children. The service in collaboration with Foster Carer Mentors and children's Social Workers will take this action forward.

### 3. Payments to Foster Carers

- 3.1 A new fostering fee payment structure was launched across both Councils in September 2020. The CFCA raised that Foster Carers have waited since then for consultation on other payments made to Foster Carers, such as mileage payments, and clarification around expectations of pocket money and savings for Children in Care. The service launched this consultation in November which will conclude in December.
- 3.2 A revised Foster Carer Handbook will be launched following the conclusion of the consultation, which will provide Foster Carers with full payment information, a fostering structure chart, clear information about the role of each part of the service and what to do if Foster Carers are concerned about any issue which needs to be addressed by the service, beyond the discussions they have with their Supervising Social Worker.
- 3.3. The CFCA noted that a growing number of older children with more complex needs are requiring family-based care and often in an emergency. Ensuring that the service has the right offer to Foster Carers willing to provide care to this cohort of children is a strategic priority, so that children are not moving to live with carers who are not supported by our skilled and experienced Social Workers or move as a result to fostering households at a distance from their support networks. Alongside this, the service has also reviewed the Accreditation Level Standards (skills level matrix), providing clear expectations linked to each Accreditation Level and how Foster Carers can evidence that they have met the standards.
- 3.4 The service is working to resolve carer dissatisfaction as soon as it arises and has introduced a clear process for Supervising Social Worker's to support escalation of any concerns that Foster Carers may have with their line manager and, if necessary, the Service Manager for the Support and Supervision function will also provide support to resolve. This is an important element in the service's retention strategy. In addition, the Household Review and Practice Standards Team monitors all feedback, positive and negative, and has introduced an exit interview process (as discussed at the last Sub Committee) for when Foster Carers notify the service of their decision to resign. This will ensure lessons are learned within the service and a quarterly service newsletter has also been introduced which will highlight learning from service audit activity as part of the Fostering Audit Programme introduced in September.

## 4. Staffing

- 4.1 The service is pleased to report that it has had success with social work recruitment and crucially the function that supervises and supports Foster Carers is now fully staffed. Recruitment to the remaining vacant posts elsewhere in the service is a priority however, the service is experiencing the same challenges in Social Worker recruitment as the wider system is experiencing and is slower than hoped.

## 5. Recruitment

- 5.1 The CFCA raised that recruitment campaigns need to be more specific and reflective of the professional role Foster Carers undertake. The service has reviewed the messaging used in recruitment campaigns as well as revising the entire fostering website. In addition, the service has introduced a Foster Carer Recruitment Ambassador role and at this early stage is looking to engage six Foster Carers across both Councils with an interest in working alongside the service to engage local communities, partners, and businesses to raise the awareness of fostering as a career and advance our marketing strategies and recruitment campaigns. Ambassadors will also meet with prospective applicants to share their experience of fostering and help the service to dispel some of the myths that can prevent enquirers taking the next step and submitting their applications to foster.
- 5.2 The service has introduced a first year of fostering programme, 'Next Steps', which will continue to be developed. The 'Next Steps' programme includes:
- An individualised training and support programme tailored to meet the needs of new carers.
  - Linking carers in assessment with an experienced Foster Carers who will continue to act as their Mentor.
  - Training to enhance therapeutic parenting awareness and skills
  - Providing new Foster Carers with practical evidenced based techniques and strategies
- 5.3 Update on Foster Carer Survey

In line with the subcommittee theme on education, the below table details the thematic responses received in the Foster Carer Survey relating to training and how the service has used the feedback to develop the training offer to Foster Carers:

<b>Foster Carers told us:</b>	<b>The Fostering Service responded:</b>
<b>We need to improve and provide a more in-depth skills to foster training</b>	The Skills to Foster training programme has been refreshed to include additional content relating to therapeutic parenting and also updated concepts and terminology to reflect society today. E-learning modules (for example Internet Safety and Health and Nutrition) have been introduced as well as Discussion Forums with experienced carers. Pre-approval training will continue to be reviewed by the training focus group which includes Foster Carer representation and attendance from workforce development. The aim is to improve the preparation and confidence of carers, so they are able to care for the children we need them to when approved.

**New carers need a better training programme when newly approved**

The service has developed a first year of fostering framework called 'Next Steps' which as well as carers being able to attend generic training also includes practical information Foster Carers need when their first child comes to live with them and a bespoke series of workshops which include child development, managing behaviours toolbox, Diversity & Identify-inclusive fostering and Looking after Yourself & Building Resilience.

**Experienced carers want more in depth therapeutic training**

The Mentoring Scheme has been revised to provide a combined Mentorship Framework and will be launched in November. All new Foster Carers will be matched with a Mentor during their pre-approval journey. The service will also be offering Mentors Mentorship training through Cambridgeshire Skills and training on allegations as the service recognises that some Foster Carers would benefit from a Mentor when subject to investigations.

The service is piloting membership for 15 households to the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting. Members can access resources, forums, peer support, 1:1 consultation and much more. The pilot will be evaluated alongside Foster Carers in January 2022 and if the outcome is favourable, the service hopes to build on the offer of membership.

**Foster Carers would like more specialised training for carers looking after children with disabilities and complex health needs**

The service has also commissioned a 6 week Parenting Therapeutically course. So far 10 fostering households have attended the training with a further 20 households booked to attend.

The service is developing this offer with colleagues in the 0-25 service and a Foster Carer from Peterborough has offered to co facilitate training. This year the service has also commissioned 'Think Autism' training which is a combination of training and discussion groups. Where needed, specialist training is arranged with the relevant health professionals for a specific child.

**Foster Carers would like specific training to support them with managing challenging behaviours and more in-depth training that focuses on practices and tools to change carers parenting approach. Foster Carers would also like more training targeted at looking after older children and teenagers which is co delivered alongside carers who already care for this age range and training that focusses more on practical skills and theory-based practices**

The service is working alongside commissioning and Early Help colleagues to develop a bid to the Youth Endowment Fund aiming to provide an evidenced based Triple P Parenting Programme suited to Foster Carers with the goal of increasing knowledge, skills and confidence and reducing the prevalence of mental health, emotional and behavioural difficulties in children and adolescents. A Positive Behaviour Support training course has run twice so far this year.

**Foster Carers want us to provide more training that is face to face rather than e learning/virtual and a mixture of courses that are run during the week when children are at school, in the evenings and at weekends**

The service has just delivered its first hybrid Skills to Foster training, which was a mixture of face-to-face training on a Saturday and virtual training in the evenings. The service does recognise the importance of new carers meeting other carers but finding suitably large training venues remains a challenge due to Covid restrictions.

<p><b>Foster Carers value experienced foster carers attending training to share their experiences and positive examples so others can learn</b></p> <p><b>Foster carers would like care experienced young people to be involved in training sessions with new and existing carers</b></p> <p><b>Foster carers told us that the TSDS document is too onerous and asked us to explore whether there are better ways of supporting carers to complete it</b></p>	<p>The service is hoping to invite experienced carers to co-facilitate the Next Steps workshops, experienced carers already support training courses such as 'Moving Children on to Adoption' and Skills to Foster attendees value learning and talking with the approved foster carers who attend.</p> <p>The Skills to Foster training includes care experienced young people joining for some of the course. The service will continue to explore opportunities with colleagues in the participation team to build on this.</p> <p>TSDS are a required set of Standards defined by the Department of Education which mainstream Foster Carers are expected to evidence completion of within a year of being approved. The TSDS workbook is understandably thorough but the service will undertake a review in early 2022 to explore how the workbook can be made more accessible.</p>
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### 3. Alignment with corporate priorities

- 3.1 A good quality of life for everyone  
There are no significant implications for this priority.
- 3.2 Thriving places for people to live  
There are no significant implications for this priority.
- 3.3 The best start for Cambridgeshire's children

The entire report is aligned with this priority as the Fostering Service is responsible for delivering safe, secure and local foster homes for Cambridgeshire's Children in Care

- 3.4 Net zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2050  
There are no significant implications for this priority.

### 4. Significant Implications

- 4.1 None.

### 5. Source documents

- 5.1 None.

### 6. Accessibility

- 6.1: An accessible version of this report is available on request from [Fiona van den Hout](#)