

Report from Cambridgeshire Fostering Service and Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association

To: Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee

Meeting Date: 3 August 2022

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

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Forward Plan ref: Not applicable

Outcome: This report has been submitted by the Fostering service in partnership with the Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association.

Recommendation: The Sub-Committee is recommended to:

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

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1. Summary

- 1.1 This report has been prepared to update the Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee on engagement activity with the Cambridgeshire Fostering Community, and to provide an overview of development activity Foster Carers have participated in within the service.
- 1.2 The Fostering Service has attended meetings with the Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association (CFCA) to hear feedback from Foster Carers on what is working well and what Foster Carers feel needs to be considered or addressed by the Fostering Service and colleagues within the wider children's services. The CFCA meetings took place monthly, in April, May and June. The Head of Service for Fostering, the Head of Service for Corporate Parenting and the Support and Supervision Service Manager for Fostering are also invited to attend the CFCA meetings.
- 1.3 The Head of Service for Fostering meets monthly with the Chair and Vice Chair of the CFCA and the Peterborough Foster Carer Committee (PFCC) which is a good opportunity to discuss service developments and plans in more detail and review feedback from Foster Carers received at formal meetings. In June, the Chair and Vice Chair of the CFCA have agreed to share more of the responsibilities and activity relating to CFCA business.
- 1.4 The CFCA are involved in some of the work being initiated within the service alongside other members of our Foster Community. The service recognises that there are further opportunities for the CFCA as an Association to be involved in service development and we will work with the CFCA to utilise its support to engage more carers in working groups relating to recruitment, retention, training and mentoring. The service and the CFCA will work together to continue to develop this partnership.
- 1.5 In April, there was a new initiative focused on carer retention. A working group meets monthly and is attended by staff from all functions within the service, Foster Carers from across both Local Authorities and the Chairs from both the CFCA and the Peterborough Foster Carer Community (PFCC). The working group has focussed on improving the following areas: financial processes, feelings of isolation, allegations/complaints and managing complex behaviours. The impact of the group has seen an improvement in retention of carers in Quarter One compared to the same period last year. In addition, to support the work of the group, retention visits are carried out to all carers who have indicated they may wish to leave the service to discuss their situation and to agree how the service can support them to remain within our Fostering Community. This approach has proven positive and will be developed further in partnership with the CFCA.
- 1.6 The Fostering Recruitment Ambassadors from within the wider Fostering Community continue to work alongside the service supporting recruitment activity and raising the awareness of Private Fostering in their communities using their wealth of knowledge and experience of the fostering task. Our Recruitment Ambassadors attend and support with our Information Sessions for prospective carers who have registered an interest in fostering.
- 1.7 The Mentoring Scheme for Foster Carers continues to be developed and we are currently working to align the approach in both Local Authorities. More recently, we have provided training via the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) to one of our Mentors so that they can focus their support to Foster Carers who are subject to allegations or concerns. This is a voluntary arrangement, but we hope that Foster Carers will find it beneficial. The

role of a Foster Carer Mentor is to support Foster Carers in their first year of being approved, to provide peer support to enable carers to look after children with complex needs and prevent unplanned moves for Children in Care.

- 1.8 The Chairs of the CFCA and PFCC also provide Mentorship support to other carers. To improve the support, we provide our Foster Carer Mentors, the Service is also providing specific Mentorship training via 'Cambridgeshire Skills' which is a ten-week course and currently seven Foster Carers are attending.
- 1.9 Foster Carer Support Groups are being delivered using a hybrid model of 'face to face' and virtually, which has proven successful in increasing the number of attendees. Four groups are held in Cambridgeshire and two in Peterborough which run on a monthly basis. A specific group is held to support Foster Carers who care for children with disabilities. More recently, we have also introduced a monthly virtual Teenage Support Group which focusses on the needs of this cohort of children. The first Teenage Support Group was held in June and was attended by 28 fostering households. The CFCA and PCC Chair and other members of the committees are very proactive in attending and supporting the carers groups.
- 1.10 The service involved some of our Foster Carers in reviewing the training course provided to applicant carers following feedback received in the Foster Carer Survey conducted in 2021. The service has now adopted the Journey2Foster course which has replaced the Skills to Foster course which has received positive feedback from applicant carers. The Young Trainers and our experienced Foster Carers provide an invaluable contribution to this training.
- 1.11 The service has launched its new branding and logo in consultation with Foster Carers and the Children in Care Council. The branding is more dynamic and reflective of our new shared service.



2. Main Issues Raised by CFCA

- 2.1 Foster Carers have asked the service to continue to support the CFCA to raise the profile of the Association and continue to request that the service share the contact details for Foster Carers from the wider Foster Community. This issue has been outstanding since 2019. The CFCA have been exploring options to provide all CCC foster Carers with a dedicated email address specifically for their fostering role.

Service response

- 2.2 The new Foster Carer Agreements will be sent to Foster Carers shortly and we are exploring whether we can ask Foster Carers to 'opt in' to sharing their personal contact details with the CFCA and PFCC.
- 2.3 The service has explored the request from the CFCA to provide Foster Carers with

Cambridgeshire County Council email addresses, but regrettably this is not currently possible. As reported at the last Sub Committee, it has been clarified that email addresses cannot be provided in isolation of other network services provided to Council Officers or Council employees.

2.4 The profile of the CFCA continues to be raised as follows:

- Inviting the CFCA to contribute to the bi-monthly Newsletter and the service invites material for future issues. The CFCA requests more autonomy when submitting information for the Newsletter and the service will work in partnership with the CFCA to ensure submissions reflect the purpose of the Newsletter whilst remaining informative to the wider Fostering Community.
- The CFCA and PFCC Chairs and Vice Chairs were invited to the Fostering Service Relaunch on 01 April 2022. However, there was some dissatisfaction from the wider Fostering Community, whose invitations were belatedly withdrawn, due to venue restrictions regarding Covid. The service has apologised to the Carers who had confirmed their attendance and agrees that this could have been communicated at an earlier opportunity.
- The CFCA and PFCC attended the New Carers Event held on the 13 May 2022 and spoke about their role to new Foster Carers who joined our Fostering Community during the height of the pandemic. The CFCA has fed-back that it would have been advantageous to have more notice and planning for this event. It is the intention of the service to work with both the CFCA and PFCC to deliver this event annually.
- Ensuring Supervising Social Workers share information about the CFCA and PFCC with the Foster Carers they support, depending on which Council they foster for.

2.5 CFCA would like clear 'Terms of Reference', in order that they are able to function within an agreed framework and are fully aware of their role within the service. There was an historic 'service level agreement' in 2019. However, despite regular requests by CFCA to implement 'Terms of Reference' this continues to be an outstanding task.

2.6 Service response: The service is advocating that the CFCA produce their Terms of Reference with support from the Supervision and Support Service Manager, in order that everyone is clear about the role, remit and function of the CFCA.

2.7 The CFCA have raised the need to recruit more carers. There is also an acknowledgment that the needs of children have increased, and that Foster Carers are keen to work with the service to support sufficiency needs. The CFCA has supported the service by reaching out to carers via their Facebook Group for children who need Foster Care in an emergency.

Service response: The service welcomes the CFCA offer of support.

2.8 Transport for children continues to be a major challenge for Foster Carers. The CFCA have fedback that this has continued to cause Foster Carers a great deal of anxiety. Arrangements are often delayed in being set up due to how the system is currently working, and there is no system in place that enables Foster Carers to change arrangements for transport in an emergency.

- 2.9 **Service response:** The Fostering Service Manager attends all Transport related meetings in both Local Authorities and is discussing how the new transport portal can also be accessed by Fostering Social Workers to support Foster Carers and children with these changes in transport requirements. The service continues to escalate individual concerns to the wider organisation.
- 2.10 Obtaining passports for Children in Care in a timely way continues to be an issue in both Local Authorities, which has been further affected by delays stemming from delays within the Passport Office. Foster Carers need clarity regarding the legal responsibility of applying for a passport and have offered to support the Children's Teams in any way they can.
- 2.11 **Service response:** The Fostering Service continues to escalate individual concerns and are awaiting the outcome of the process review being undertaken in Corporate Parenting.
- 2.12 Access to dental appointments for Children in Care remains an issue, particularly in Cambridgeshire. Foster Carers have requested a list of dentists that will accept children onto their patient list.
- 2.13 **Service response:** The Designated Nurse for Children in Care has provided a letter from NHS England which confirms that 40 dental practices across the region have volunteered to provide dental care and where these practices are. This will be resent to Foster Carers.
- 2.14 Foster Carer's have feedback that there have been delays in obtaining consent or approval for important events such as medical consent, vaccinations, school trips, contact, respite, transport, overnight stays and DLA spend. The CFCA would like to work with the children's teams to develop an escalation process that ensures requests are responded to and progress tracked in a timely way.
- 2.15 **Service response:** The service welcomes the CFCA's offer of support and would be keen to work together to develop a feedback loop for traceability.
- 2.16 Across both Local Authorities, staffing pressures within the wider children's services has meant that children have experienced changes in their Social Workers and caused difficulties for Foster Carers being able to make contact with them when they need to. The CFCA feel that it would be advantageous for social workers to have a better understanding of the foster care role, remit and pressures.
- 2.17 **Service response:** Improving the recruitment and retention of Social Workers is a priority for both Local Authorities and the Fostering Service is developing a strategy to ensure that the role and remit of Foster Carers is better understood within the wider organisation. This will be shared shortly with the CFCA and PFCC and their support in delivering this is welcomed.
- 2.18 Following feedback from Foster Carers, funding for respite arrangements and expectations around pocket money for children are being reviewed. The CFCA is keen to provide the service with more support when major changes to financial payments are being considered to identify any potential issues for foster carers and also support to communicate any changes effectively to the wider fostering community.

- 2.19 **Service response:** The service welcomes the CFCA offer of support.
- 2.20 The CFCA would like more clarity on the support provided to Foster Carers who look after young people in a Staying Put or Supported Lodgings arrangement in the event that the young person defaults on their contribution towards the cost of their rent. This puts the foster carers in a difficult position, whereby they want to support the young person, but this has a detrimental and direct impact on their finances, which in turn jeopardises the care arrangement.
- 2.21 **Service response:** Where there have been issues related to these care arrangements, which impact on the foster carer's financial viability, these have been rectified by the service. Moreover, the service will work with the Corporate Parenting Service to review and improve these care arrangements.
- 2.22 The CFCA are concerned that the transferable skills that all new applicants have, including Foster Carers transferring from Independent Agencies, are equally recognised when decisions are made about their Accreditation Level on approval.
- 2.22 **Service response:** The service carefully considers the skills and experience that all new carers bring with them when they join our Fostering Community and fostering assessments are strengths based whilst addressing areas for development. In 2021, the service introduced a mechanism to review a Foster Carers accreditation level when they have demonstrated the required competency which has seen a number of carers moving up the framework outside of their Annual Review.
- 2.23 The CFCA advises that Foster Carers feel financial acknowledgement needs to be provided to existing carers who care for children with complex needs.
- 2.24 **Service response:** The service will continue to consider individual funding requests based on the child's needs.
- 2.25 The CFCA advises that Foster Carers feel that there is a need for more professional qualification recognition and accredited training opportunities.
- 2.26 **Service response:** The service will explore this in the training programme for 2023-2024.

3. Alignment with corporate priorities

3.1 Environment and Sustainability

There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.2 Health and Care

There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.3 Places and Communities

There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.4 Children and Young People

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

3.5 Transport

There are no significant implications for this priority.

4. Source documents

4.1 None.