

Report from Cambridgeshire Fostering Service and Cambridgeshire Foster Carer Association

To: Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee

Meeting Date: 20th March 2024

From: Assistant Director Fostering, Regional Adoption and Corporate Parenting

Electoral division(s): All

Forward Plan ref: n/a

Key decision: No

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
- b) Raise any queries they have with the lead officers

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1. Creating a greener, fairer and more caring Cambridgeshire

1.1 Ambition 7 - Children and young people have opportunities to thrive

The report reflects the engagement and support to foster carers who play a vital role for those children and young people who are in care

2. Background

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 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 Head of Service for Fostering and the Service Manager for the support and part of the Fostering service are also invited to attend the CFCA meetings.
- 2.3 The Head of Service for Fostering will meet monthly with the Chair and Vice Chair of the CFCA which is a good opportunity to discuss service developments and plans in more detail and review feedback from Foster Carers received at formal meetings.
- 2.4 The CFCA are involved in some of the work being initiated within the service alongside other members of our fostering community. The service recognizes 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 utilize their 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.
- 2.5 The retention working group had been meeting bi-monthly and attended by staff from all functions within the service, Foster Carers from the CFCA and the rest of the fostering community attended and contributed to the various working groups. The retention working group has previously focussed on improving the following areas: financial processes, feelings of isolation, allegations/complaints and managing complex behaviours. The impact of the group had 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. There is some work required to further develop the work of this group, in recent meetings the service and the CFCA discussed the following:
- Re-introducing our Foster carer Retention Meetings (bimonthly) as well as our mentoring project both of which require a slightly different approach/focus as well as needing to revisit the Terms of Reference (ToR) after a period of change due to the recent uncoupling with PCC
 - Foster Carers welcome the collaborative working to raise/address any issues which may impact on carer retention. Carers are keen to continue to work together to identify

themes of concern and be part of the collaborative solution focused working group (as appropriate)

- The same applies to the mentoring group where we aim to identify a mentor for each new carer and/or any household experiencing difficulties with the fostering task/role
- For Foster Carers to continue to be remunerated for the support they provide to the service in their range of roles.

- 2.6 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.
- 2.7 The mentoring scheme for Foster Carers continues to be developed. The Fostering Service has 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. We hope to be able to provide this training again to carers who may have an interest in supporting peers through what 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.
- 2.8 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 on a monthly basis. A specific group is held to support Foster Carers who care for children with disabilities. We also have a bi-monthly virtual Teenage Support Group which focusses on the needs of this cohort of children. The CFCA and other members of the fostering community are very proactive in attending and supporting the carers groups.

3. Main Issues Raised by CFCA

3.1 Delay in Passports

Feedback Theme and Context: Delays in obtaining passports for Children in Care. This has been raised as a challenge by Foster Carers in Cambridgeshire.

Foster Carer Feedback and Ideas: Foster Carers are requesting that Children's social workers apply for passports, and these are not being processed in a timely manner due to ambiguity around the process and who is responsible for making the application and progressing the result in a timely manner. Foster Carers are requesting a defined process and carers would like to have a point of contact. Previously this was a Business Officer.

Corporate Parent's Response:

Corporate Parenting Service: response required.

Fostering Service: The fostering service recognises this is an important issue for carers and will be adopting an escalation model as follows:

- Firstly, the Fostering Social Worker will raise the matter with the Child's Social Worker for a response within 5 working days
- If there is no response or the matter is delayed, the Fostering Team Manager will contact the Child's Team Manager to progress the issue and allow 3 working days for a response
- If there is no response within 5 days, the Fostering Head of Service will request a meeting with the Head of Service for Corporate Parenting and Team Manager to formulate a plan with timescales for completion.

3.2 Transport for Children in Care

Feedback Theme and Context: Transport for Children in Care to Family Time, school and important appointments are cumbersome and continue to be unreliable. This has been raised as a challenge by Foster Carers to Cambridgeshire fostering staff via the regular feedback loop meetings between the service and its carers, this is an ongoing issue.

Foster Carer Feedback and Ideas: Where Social Workers have not made applications for transport in a timely manner and no transport is available, this means that Social Workers or carers are required to meet this deficit. This is not a good use of social work time and Foster Carers struggle to meet the competing needs of all the children in the family home to be able to take on this task for any length of time. Foster Carers need to feel reassured that the transport is in place for the children to whom they offer care. This continues to be an issue, particularly when children come into a care arrangement often in an emergency and the children's social worker has not been proactive in setting up transport to and from school. This not only becomes difficult in terms of managing the journey and the impact this may have on either the SW or carers but also for the child who often misses up to two weeks of school (or more) which is not acceptable.

Foster Carers have asked that where there are no changes in placement or school, could the contracts roll onto the next term?

Could carers have some delegated authority along with Supervising Social Workers to make changes as required where there are no funding implications?

Corporate Parent's Response:

Fostering Service Response: The service recognises that this matter is significant for Foster Carers and has met with the Local Authority transport services in order to address this issue. Unfortunately the meeting also coincided with the arrival of Ofsted and as such the meeting was not well attended. The service will be rearranging the meeting to seek to improve working relationships, however we are also wanting to expand the use of delegated authority to enable Foster Carers to be creative in identifying solutions within their network.

Corporate Parenting Service:

Corporate parenting acknowledge that this is a significant matter impacting upon foster carers. As the Head of Service I have received feedback that in the vast majority of cases requests to manage transport are submitted in a timely way to reduce the burden upon carers and Social Work Staff. As a service we have recently held one meeting with the transport service to seek to improve their uptake of referrals which can in some instances

take several weeks to progress. We will provide further updates as this matter seeks resolution and thank the carers for raising the issue.

Transport Team: awaiting response.

3.3 Savings for Children in Care

Feedback Theme and Context: Clarity required around savings. Policy around ISA's, confirmation on amounts, make sure discussed at placement planning meeting. There is lack of clarity around how ISA's/savings accounts are set up for Children in Care. Savings expectations for children by their carers is yet to be written into a policy and rolled out to all carers as a mandatory expectation. However, it is understood that the Service Director (SD) for corporate parenting is currently being updated.

Foster Carer Feedback and Ideas: There is no process, procedure or a point of contact for ISA accounts. Foster Carers are still waiting for clarity on savings allowances and expectations. Need a process, procedure and a person in post/point of contact for Savings/ISA accounts for children. Could there be a dedicated email for this service, in order that all queries are responded to.

Corporate Parent's Response:

Corporate Parenting Service: In CCC we have a dedicated officer.

Fostering Service Response: We are sorry that there has been a delay with the policy and clarification of expectations. Cambridgeshire recognises that the current process for accumulating savings for children in care is both cumbersome and also creates vulnerabilities in ensuring that all children are able to accumulate savings. The new Service Director, Ranjit Chambers, has delivered her vision to ensure that all children's savings are taken at source and invested by the Local Authority. This will remove the onerous tasks from carers and also protect the savings of children from potential mismanagement.

3.4 Emergency clothing payments

Feedback Theme and Context: Children are arriving with Foster Carers in an emergency without the clothing they need, and Foster Carers may not have the funds to buy immediately. This has been raised as a challenge by Foster Carers in Cambridgeshire.

Foster Carer feedback and Ideas: This issue has come up from Foster Carers to the committee. Foster Carers appear more aware that they can claim for emergency clothing. Where carers are purchasing emergency clothing, they need to be reimbursed in a timely manner. Supervising Social Workers need to be more proactive in ensuring that carers are aware that they can apply for emergency clothing allowance.

Corporate Parent's Response:

Corporate Parenting Service:

Fostering Service: Where there is uncertainty about who is responsible for funding certain items or activities, there needs to be a process for both fostering and Children in Care (CiC) services to follow, which provides a timely response.

Receipts to be provided at the Placement Planning Meeting to Supervising Social Workers.

Fostering have reviewed (our) processes around how we reimburse carers expenses and ensure the process is robust and timely.

The Fostering Service will republish the current expenditure allowance for Foster Carers to ensure this is well communicated.

3.5 Finance Issues

Feedback Theme and Context:

Foster Carers have informed us that they would like Fostering fees and allowances (fortnightly payment) to be broken down into skills and child allowance as per NMS guidelines.

The CFCA would like their Budget to be confirmed as per previous assurances. This has been raised as a challenge by Foster Carers in Cambridgeshire.

Foster Carer Feedback and Ideas: Fosters Carers would appreciate Foster Carer finances to be accessible i.e. in the form of a leaflet, to be clear and transparent and to be broken down into skills element and children's allowances as per NMS guidance and for their pay slip to reflect this.

The CFCA would like their annual budget confirmed.

The fostering service to consider how best to ensure the fostering allowances are made available and are clear and transparent and are represent both the skills element as well as the child's allowances.

Corporate Parent Response:

Corporate Parenting Service: - N/A

Fostering Service: The fostering service will commit to a review of the Fostering finance remuneration scheme which will start in April 2024 and is anticipated to take a year to complete. The review will be undertaken by the service, in consultation with carers and will be sensitive to feedback already received about the carers desire to have both skills and child payment recognised separately.

The Head of Service will confirm the budget for the CFCA for the financial year starting 2024 by the 25th of April.

3.6 Children's Files

Feedback Theme and Context: Carers have requested examples of logs for children's recordings, either fictitious or redacted to maintain confidentiality but to provide examples which would support carers to develop their narrative about the child and could write logs that represent the child, their feelings and wishes, and their experiences as positively as possible.

Foster Carers would like to have access where appropriate to Childrens chronologies when children first arrive, maybe to review this at the initial Placement Planning Meeting.

This has been raised as a challenge by Foster Carers in Cambridgeshire.

Foster Carer Feedback and Ideas: Having clear, detailed, transparent information about the child would support carers to better understand how they can meet the needs of the child as well as mitigate any risks.

To share a child's chronology and most up to date risk assessment/referral at the PPM. Having the correct information available enables the carer to better understand the needs of the child and the fostering service to know how better support their carer.

Corporate Parent's Response:

Fostering Service: The fostering service recognises that in order to produce excellence we need to be shown at times what high standard recordings might look like. The service will be running a brief campaign in May 2024 in which we will spend the month exploring the importance of accurate and child centered recordings for children. The service will be providing training and examples during this month for Foster Carers.

3.7 Online Safety

Feedback Theme and Context: Foster Carers have requested an online/e-safety checklist and they feel that access to tech help/guidance would be helpful - generally carers don't feel prepared especially when teenagers are so much more able with regards social media platforms and technology. This can be the source of difficulties in the relationship between carers and young people. This has been raised as a challenge by Foster Carers in Cambridgeshire.

Foster Carer Feedback and Ideas: That more informed specialist training would be helpful in keeping children and young people safe. Foster Carers feel inadequately equipped to help young people manage their social media access to stay safe or even to help manage the devices young people may have. Specialist training/online support would be welcomed.

Corporate Parent's Response:

Corporate Parenting Service: - N/A

Fostering Service: The fostering service has received this feedback and will be seeking to commission training from experts within the 2024 training brochure. We will further work with the trainer to produce a checklist or written guidance that carers might use to help children remain safe online.

3.8 Dialogue between the Fostering Service and CFCA

Feedback Theme and Context: The Fostering Service meets regularly with chair of the CFCA and has (in more recent meetings) discussed the following: re-introducing our Foster Carer Retention Meetings (bi-monthly) as well as our Mentoring Project, both of which require a slightly different approach/focus and require a review of the terms of reference (ToR) after a period of change due to the recent uncoupling with PCC. This has been discussed by Foster Carers and the service as beneficial and in need of renewed focus

from the service.

Foster Carer Feedback and ideas: Foster Carers welcome the collaborative working to raise/address any issues which may impact on carer retention. Carers are keen to work together to identify themes of concern and be part of the collaborative solution fostered working group (as appropriate).

The same applies to the mentoring group where we aim to identify a mentor for each new carer and/or any household experiencing difficulties with the fostering task/role.

For Foster Carers to continue to be remunerated for the support they provide to the service in their range of roles.

Corporate Parent's Response:

Corporate Parenting Service: - N/A

Fostering Service: The service recognises this is important and has already relaunched the retention meetings. The Service Manager and author of this report will be pleased to review the terms of reference for the mentoring project and further explore how excellence in carer retention looks like.

4. Alternative Options Considered

Not applicable

5. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

5.1 The Sub-Committee are asked to note the report.

6. Significant Implications

6.1 Finance Implications

There are no significant implications

6.2 Legal Implications

There are no significant implications

6.3 Risk Implications

There are no significant implications

6.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

There are no significant implications

6.5 Climate Change and Environment Implications (Key decisions only)

There are no significant implications

5. Source documents

5.1 None