

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE**Wednesday, 27 November 2024**

REPORT TITLE:	FOSTERING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 1 APRIL 2023 TO 31 MARCH 2024
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

REPORT SUMMARY

This report is to provide an overview to the Children Young People and Education Committee of the Fostering Service Annual Report for the period of 1st April 2023 - 31st March 2024 for consideration and scrutiny. The Fostering Annual Report provides an overview of the fostering service in terms of:

- Key performance over the period
- Analysis of current practice
- Key issues and risks
- Focus areas for the next 12 months.

The Fostering Annual Report 2023-24 is at appendix A.

This report is focussed on a key aspect of the Wirral Plan 2021-26: Working together for brighter futures for our children, young people, and their families by breaking the cycle of poor outcomes for all regardless of their background.

The report affects all wards but is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is requested to review and scrutinise the information contained within the Annual report attached at Appendix A; and agree the Annual Fostering Report 2023-24 as published.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The monitoring of the Fostering Service is required under the Care Standards Act 2000 and Fostering Regulations 2011 and the Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011. The Local Authority provides foster placements for children looked after whom the Local Authority acts as Corporate Parent for.
- 1.2 The purpose of this report is for the committee to evaluate the extent as to which Wirral Council has fulfilled its responsibilities as a Fostering Service providing placements for Children Looked After by Wirral Council.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 It is a statutory requirement that the Fostering Service completes an annual report, the annual report will be presented to Corporate Parenting Panel, therefore the option is not to bring it to this Committee.
- 2.2 This report could have been delivered as a briefing note however it is considered that a full report would ensure members are fully informed.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Wirral Fostering Service

- 3.1 The aim of the Fostering Service is to provide a range of high-quality foster placements that meet the needs of our looked after in line with the requirements of fostering regulations and national minimum standards. The service is responsible for:
 - Support, supervision, and training of foster carers including family and friend carers (connected carers)
 - Ensuring provision of local safe and supportive foster placements in accordance with fostering national minimum standards
 - Promoting placement stability and permanence planning for our children
 - Recruitment and assessment of new foster carers
- 3.2 The Fostering Service comprises of the Head of Service, Operational Lead, 3 Managers who are responsible for Mainstream, Connected Carers and Recruitment and Assessment Teams. There are advanced social workers, supervising social workers and family support workers across the teams. Further information on the Team structure is contained within the Annual Report document at appendix A.
- 3.3 Each year, the Fostering Service produces an Annual Report which provides an overview of the activity of the Service over the previous year, key performance and practice analysis including risks and issues and plans for the next 12 months. The Annual Report should be read in conjunction with the Foster Care Statement of Purpose which sets out the legislative and regulatory context under which the local authority carries out its foster care responsibilities.

Annual Report Summary

- 3.4 The Fostering Service provides a range of placements with foster carers with a varied experience and skill base. As of 31st March 2024 there were 275 approved Fostering Households in Wirral which includes both mainstream carers and connected carers.
- 3.5 A summary of the achievements, progress and plans in relation to supervision and support includes:
- Mentoring schemes continue to be well received across the service.
 - An increase in Fostering Skills Band Payments has been proposed, aligned to neighbouring Local Authorities, cost of living rises and inflation.
 - 40 Fostering Panels have been held during the reporting period.
 - Feedback from those attending fostering panel meetings has been positive.
 - Panel members report that the overall quality of assessments being presented to panel from the assessment team continue to improve.
- 3.6 Further information about the progress of the Fostering Panel is within the Fostering Panel Annual Report attached at appendix C.

Recruitment Summary

- 3.7 A summary of the achievements, progress and plans in relation to recruitment and retention includes:
- Prospective foster carer mainstream assessments continue to be completed within 16 weeks, which is in line with our Independent Fostering Agency competitors.
 - An increased emphasis on marketing and promotion through campaigning which has included:
 - Wendy and Gareth – Fostering isn't a job these children are part of your family
 - Tranmere Rovers campaign with owner Mark Palios
 - Long services Foster Carer Awards. December 2023
 - Children's Christmas party. December 2023
 - LBGTQ+ Adoption and Fostering Week. March 2024
 - Wirral View – 8 ways to change young lives
 - Regular social media activity via Facebook, Instagram and Twitter
- 3.8 The number of enquiries for the reporting year was 46 which is a significant decrease from previous years with 2022/23 seeing 67 enquiries made. As reported by OFSTED this reduction has been seen nationally.
- 3.9 From the 46 enquiries made 21 either did not wish to progress with an initial visit or did not respond to contact by the Fostering Service. The service responds to all

enquiries within one working day and where applicants cannot be reached, contact will continue with a maximum of three contacts made and then the enquiry will be closed.

- 3.10 25 initial visits were completed, the fostering service aims to meet these individuals within five working days, but this is solely dependent on the enquirer. From the 25 initial visits 13 people applied to foster with all being approved as Foster Carers in this period. This is a conversion rate of 52% for initial visit to approval.
- 3.11 Two connected carers were transferred to be mainstream Foster Carers during this period increasing the number of carers approved to 15.

Foster4

- 3.12 Wirral has joined a regional collaboration with 7 other Local Authorities – Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens and Warrington. This is following funding from the Department of Education to increase recruitment and retention of Foster Carers. This includes investment in foster care recruitment and the creation of the Mockingbird Model for Wirral Carers. The scheme will run from the financial year 2024/25.

Challenges

- 3.13 The Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) market continues to impact significantly on the local authority's ability to recruit foster carers, due to effective marketing campaigns and higher pay rates for carers. It is hoped that the Foster4 collaboration will help to overcome this challenge.

Service Priorities for 2024-2025

- Recruitment to continue to increase our number of skilled foster carers. This will be supported by Foster4 which will provide increased marketing activity in the borough. This will compliment inhouse marketing campaigns which will continue via the Local Authority communications team.
- Retention of Foster Carers to be improved by actively valuing our foster carers and engaging them in the co production of a foster carer charter. This will be complimented by ensuring that our carers are provided with a high level of support and regular retention activity.
- The implementation of the Mockingbird model which will provide enhanced support to carers along with the aim to improve retention of foster carers.
- Develop recruitment partnership working with local businesses and community groups. This will be supported by the work of Foster4.
- Increase the visibility of Fostering within the local community through recruitment events and local advertising.
- Continue to promote the Council as a Fostering Friendly organisation and encouraging other employers to become Fostering Friendly employers.
- Increase online profile through social media platforms and digital marketing via Foster4 and inhouse communications team.
- Raise awareness of differing types of fostering.
- Increase number of Foster Carer enquiries and conversion rate to approved Foster Carers.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Annual Report references the need to focus on recruitment and retention of mainstream foster carers. The cost in not having enough foster carers in Wirral is not limited to emotional and physical well-being of children, but also in terms of the financial cost to the Council.
- 4.2 Placing children with Independent Fostering Agencies or Residential providers, can have financial implications for the Council given the increase of cost of this.
- 4.3 This means that if Wirral does not employ enough foster carers and must rely on Independent Fostering Agencies and residential children's homes, the financial cost to the Council will be high.
- 4.4 The way to alleviate this is to increase the sufficiency of in house foster carers, and the support offered to them.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The monitoring of the Fostering Service is required under the Care Standards Act 2000 and the Fostering Service Regulations 2011.
- 5.2 The local authority also has a duty to provide sufficiency of care options to children looked after, and as part of their sufficiency strategy local authorities must ensure they have adequate numbers of foster placements as laid down in the Care Standards Act 2000.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 There are no direct resource implications arising out of the report. The plans for next 12 months as outlined in the Annual Report may require additional staffing e.g., marketing officer and dedicated website, however, these will be subject to further reporting and approval.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 The Annual Report highlights several risks around the ability to recruit and retain new foster carers. Ultimately, this may lead to challenges in providing appropriate foster placements for children looked after and increasing reliance on Independent Fostering agencies and high-cost residential placements.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Fostering Annual Report will be shared with key stakeholders across the council and partners. Along with the Statement of Purpose, foster carers will be provided with copies of the report, and it will be available on the Policy and Procedure website for Children's Social Care.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are no significant environmental or climate implications arising from this report.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no community wealth implications arising out of the report.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Fostering Annual Report 2023/24
Appendix B Statement of Purpose Fostering 2023
Appendix C Fostering Panel Annual Report 2023/24

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Care Standards Act 2000
Fostering Regulations 2011
Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Children, Young People and Education Committee in accordance with section A of its Terms of Reference:

(a) exercising management, oversight and delivery of services to children and young people in relation to their care, wellbeing, education or health, with the exception of any powers reserved to full Council.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Children Young People Education Committee	