



## **CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

**Wednesday, 18 October 2023**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>FOSTERING ANNUAL REPORT 1ST APRIL 2022-31ST MARCH 2023</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN, FAMILIES &amp; EDUCATION</b>

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

This report is to provide an overview to the Children Young People and Education Committee of the Fostering Annual Report for the period of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 - 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 for consideration and scrutiny. The Fostering Annual Report provides an overview of the fostering service in terms of:

- Key performance to date
- Analysis of current practice
- Key issues and risks
- Plans for continuous improvement and progress over the next 12 months.

The Fostering Annual Report 2022-23 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 recommended to:

1. Review and scrutinise the information contained within the Annual report attached at Appendix A; and endorse the Annual Fostering Report 2022-23 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 consider the extent as to which Wirral Council has fulfilled its responsibilities as a Fostering Service providing placements for Children Looked After by the Council.

### **2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 2.1 No other options considered as the Children, Young People and Education Committee should provide oversight to the Corporate Parenting Board.

### **3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

#### **Wirral Fostering Service**

- 3.1 The aim of the Fostering Service is to provide a range of high quality and safe foster placements that meet the needs of children looked after in line with the requirements of national guidance and fostering 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 Persons 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 As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, there were 274 mainstream and connected Fostering Households. In total, these households support 57% of children looked after in Wirral.
- 3.5 A summary of the achievements, progress and plans in relation to supervision and support includes:
- Three of the mandatory training sessions have been incorporated into the Skills to Foster Programme so that they are completed before registration.
  - Mentoring schemes continue to be well received across the Service.
  - A new fostering payment schedule has been proposed, aligned with neighbouring Local Authorities and the cost of living rises and inflation.
  - 47 Fostering Panels have been held.
  - Feedback from those attending 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 Annual Report attached at appendix B.

## **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:
    - Julie R – shares fostering story September 2022
    - Quiet Girl Film – promoting fostering. November 2022
    - Long services Foster Carer Awards. December 2022
    - Children’s Christmas party. December 2022
    - LBGTQ+ Adoption and Fostering Week. March 2023
    - International Woman’s Day. March 2023
- 3.8 As a result of the marketing and promotion, there has been 67 enquiries to date this year, 85 lower than the previous year. Notwithstanding the decrease of mainstream enquires, 19 foster carers were approved, producing the same number of approved carers in 21-22. A break down in the result of all enquiries is contained within the annual report. Although levels of low enquiries were received from prospective fostering households during 22-23, the proportion that convert into applications is 28%, which is more than 50% increase from 2021-22 6%.

## **Challenges**

- 3.9 Issues with mandatory training reporting, producing unreliable data resulting in inaccuracies of tracking progress of foster carers attendance at training and vacancies as well as the up-to-date recruitment information. The issue is being actively resolved with Insight Team.
- 3.10 Equally, 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 high pay schemes for carers. National statistics in England 2022, report the number of IFA placements have increased since 2018 by 5%; accounting for 40% of foster placements. IFA foster placements in 2022 account for 45% of occupied fostering placements.

## **Service Priorities for 2022-2023**

- Retention of existing foster carers to continue, including benefits and incentives that are comparable with independent fostering agencies.
- Recruitment to continue to increase our number of skilled foster carers. A multi-faceted marketing approach is required to utilise various channels to reach our key target areas and maintain a continuous cycle.
- Develop recruitment partnership working with local businesses and community groups.
- Continue to promote the Council as a Fostering Friendly organisation and encouraging other employers to become Fostering Friendly employers.
- Increase online profile through bespoke fostering website, social media platforms and digital marketing.
- Raise awareness of differing types of fostering.
- Increase conversion rates of expressions of interest to approval, through responsive reactions to initial enquiries and timely assessments.
- Ensure all foster carers attend mandatory and statutory training.
- Increase capacity in the family mentor scheme to enable overnight stays for children and young people at risk of coming into care.

## **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 The Annual Report references the need to focus on recruitment and retention of mainstream foster carers. The cost of 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, can have financial implications for the Council given that the local authority pays approximately double the weekly amount for children to be placed.
- 4.3 For example, an in-house foster carer caring for a child aged 10, average weekly amount is approximately £230 including the skills banding payment whereas an

independent foster agency carer, caring for the same child would cost £980.59 and a residential care home would on average cost £4,300 per week.

4.4 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.

4.5 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.

5.3 Section 22C(7) to (9) Children Act 1989 requires local authorities to ensure that, as far as reasonably practicable the placement

- allows the child to live near his/her home.
- does not disrupt his/her education (particularly at Key Stage 4).
- enables the child and his/her sibling to live together, if the child has a sibling who is also looked after by the local authority.
- provides accommodation which is suitable to the child's needs if the child is disabled; and
- is within the local authority's area.

## **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 at 3.9 and 3.10 highlights several risks around the ability to recruit and retain new foster carers, and to effectively train and support foster carers. Ultimately, this may result in overall degradation in the ability to provide appropriate foster placements for children looked after and increasing reliance on Independent Fostering agencies and high-cost residential placements.

7.2 A recruitment post within the service would be ideal in terms of driving recruitment more strongly but there is no current budget available for this role. However, a joint

approach with other Local Authorities to potentially streamline and join early approaches to recruitment is being pursued and there will be some additional capacity via the 'Staying Close' project worker to engage in bespoke fostering recruitment. This post will be in place by the end of November 2023 and is funded for 2 years. The service has already improved efficiency of response times to 'contacts' to the service, assessment timescales are reduced, and we are in the process of working through additional incentives to recruit more foster carers. We have been working closely with Wirral's marketing team and have engaged in fostering engagement sessions and social events in supporting recruitment and retention, and service quality.

## **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 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. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity. There are no equality issues arising from this report.

## **10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

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

## **11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS**

11.1 Improved recruitment of foster carers will enhance the community wealth in Wirral. This is via providing loving, safe carers to care for our children within their local community wherever possible.

**REPORT AUTHOR:** Eifion Burke (Head of Service Permanence and Fostering)  
[eifionburke@wirral.gov.uk](mailto:eifionburke@wirral.gov.uk)  
Zoe Brennan (Operational Lead Fostering)  
[zoebrennan@wirral.gov.uk](mailto:zoebrennan@wirral.gov.uk)

## **APPENDICES**

Appendix A Fostering Annual Report 2022/23  
Appendix B Statement of Purpose Fostering 2023

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

None

## **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)**

<b>Council Meeting</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Children Young People Education Committee</b>	