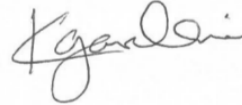


London Borough of Waltham Forest

Report Title Fostering Recruitment and Retention programme:
Northeast London

Meeting / Date Cabinet, 14 March 2024

Cabinet portfolio Councillor Kizzy Gardiner,
Portfolio Lead Member for
Children & Young People



Report author/
Contact details Abigail Adieze, Assistant Director, Corporate Parenting
Janice Horslen, Project Manager, Northeast London
Fostering Pilot

abigail.adieze@walthamforest.gov.uk

Janice.horslen@walthamforest.gov.uk

Wards affected None specifically

Public access Open

Appendices Appendix 1 – Equalities Screener

1. Summary

1.1 Six northeast London boroughs have been successful in securing funding from the Department of Education (DfE) to test new, regional ways of working to increase the number of local authority foster carers. Waltham Forest is the lead local authority (LA) working in partnership with LB Newham, LB Redbridge, LB Barking and Dagenham, LB Tower Hamlets & LB Havering. This paper provides an overview of the pilot, including progress over September – December 2023, next steps for development and governance arrangements.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Cabinet is recommended to note the progress of the pilot Fostering Recruitment and Retention programme since the funding bid was approved.

3. Proposal

3.1 Across the country, a national shortage of foster carers reduces children's chances of living in a home environment, close to their community and loving relationships. Every child deserves to grow up in a safe, stable and loving home and the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and Competition and Markets Authority review

into Children's Social Care called for urgent action to recruit more foster carers to tackle this long-standing sufficiency problem.

- 3.2 In the Government's response to these two reports, "Stable Homes, Build on Love", the DfE committed to a Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme, investing £36 million over 2023/4-2024/5. This programme aims to deliver end-to-end improvements across foster care, by attracting new leads, boosting approvals of foster carers in areas of specific shortage, as well as addressing retention through better support to existing foster carers.
- 3.3 The Fostering Recruitment and Retention programme contains three strands of work:
 - A Fostering Recruitment Hub that that supports prospective foster carers from their initial enquiry and right through the application process. This centrally-run 'front door' provides a single point of contact for those enquiring about fostering and ongoing emotional and practical advice on the approval process. Local authorities are expected to standardise processes wherever possible and work towards agreeing common terms and conditions for foster carers.
 - A foster care recruitment communications campaign to drive interest to recruitment hubs and boost the number of quality enquiries.
 - Roll out of the 'Mockingbird' fostering model to enhance the offer to new applicants and boost retention of existing carers. With funding to develop new Mockingbird "constellations", carers and the children that live with them will be supported to build strong and supportive relationships, empowering them to support each other and overcome problems before they escalate.
- 3.4 Ten self-selected "clusters" of local authorities successfully bid to deliver the programme over 2023 - 2025. LB Waltham Forest is the lead LA for one of those clusters, having formed a partnership with five other northeast London boroughs (LB Newham, LB Redbridge, LB Barking and Dagenham, LB Tower Hamlets & LB Havering).
- 3.5 Our vision as a region is to have enough skilled and nurturing foster carers providing loving and stable homes to meet the needs of all our children. To do this, our ambition is that the recruitment hub provides prospective carers with timely and accurate information and support alongside the assessment and approval process so they feel valued and have a positive recruitment experience. Ultimately, this will lead to an increase in the quality and quantity of fostering enquires and better conversion rates.
- 3.6 As the lead local authority for the cluster, LB Waltham Forest will host the Fostering Recruitment Hub ('single front door') and will be responsible for overseeing the operations and management of the Hub.
- 3.7 The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 regulates all fostering services. No statutory duties will transfer to the lead LA and each local authority will continue to assess and approve the suitability of

the prospective foster carers in line with existing regulations. This includes the process of assessment and panel recommendations.

3.8 It is proposed that the hub opens in May 2024; the operating model for the recruitment hub is in the design phase and based on the following principles:

- The hub will be built on the shared values of kindness, commitment, integrity, respect and transparency.
- The hub will be designed by local authority experts and experienced foster carers
- Each local authority will have a representation
- The hub will operate as a single front door with regional branding

3.9 A project board, chaired by the Interim Strategic Director of Place, has overall responsibility for the project, including risk management, strategic support, dispute resolution and key decision sign off. A series of working groups have been leading operational development and making recommendations on strategic decisions.

3.10 Since receiving confirmation that our bid was successful in September 2023, we have:

- Agreed a shared set of values and a vision for where we want to get to – this is guiding all decisions as we establish new ways of working
- Mapped existing operational processes across each authority, so we can retain and build on best practice and troubleshoot shared challenges
- Agreed a headline ‘user journey’ so when designing the new service, we keep carers at the centre
- Agreed and implemented governance arrangements
- Obtained sign off from the DfE for our plans and funding through until March 2025
- Agreed the staffing structure for the hub and recruited a project manager to help lead the design and initial phase of delivery
- Established a ‘foster carer reference group’ to influence and steer planning
- Drafted an internal communications plan to ensure staff across the region are kept informed of developments and have opportunities to ask questions
- Commenced work on a legally binding partnership agreement
- Begun scoping the technology options available to support the hub

4. Options & Alternatives Considered

4.1 Alternative options include a) continuing 'as is' and b) trialling other innovative approaches to fostering recruitment

4.1.1 Continuing 'as is'

(a) across the country, spend on children's placements is at unsustainable levels; the high costs associated with independent fostering agencies and private residential care are a primary driver of that spend. Continuing 'as is' provides no mitigation against rising spend on independent fostering agencies and private residential care. This grant funded pilot provides an opportunity to test regional ways of working and extend our existing, successful Mockingbird provision. Mockingbird is an evidence-based, licenced model that for some children, provides a safe, sustainable and nurturing alternative to residential care, helping to drive down spend on residential placements. A regional, scaled up approach to promoting fostering aims to generate increased numbers of high-quality enquiries from prospective carers.

(b) Following the recommendations of the Care Review and learning from Regional Adoption Agencies, central government have set out a clear policy intention to regionalise fostering recruitment. Nearly two thirds of all local authorities in England are participating in this pilot programme. By continuing 'as is' and forfeiting the opportunity to lead one of the clusters, LB Waltham Forest would be less able to influence how regionalisation develops both at a local and national level.

4.1.2 Trialling other innovative approaches to fostering recruitment:

(c) The recruitment and retention of foster carers is a corporate priority and well supported across the council. Our recent '#betheone' campaign has generated a significant interest in fostering for LB Waltham Forest and an increased number of fostering applications are in progress as a consequence.

(d) Initiatives like this are not inhibited by the pilot and will continue alongside the regional approach; where there is sufficient funding, we are able to continue trialling new approaches to bolster foster carer recruitment.

5. Council Strategic Priorities (and other National or Local Policies or Strategies)

5.1 Every conversation counts: this principle is integral to the design and delivery of the recruitment hub. Staff responding to initial fostering enquires via the single front door will be equipped to build strong relationships that support prospective foster carers through every step of their journey to becoming a foster carer. These trusting relationships help reduce 'drop out' along the way by providing timely information, advice and guidance.

- 5.2 Ensure every family and every child are given every opportunity: we recognise that families, including fostering families come in all shapes and sizes, each offering a completely unique upbringing. Our regional marketing campaigns will reflect this, targeted to reflect the demographic makeup of our children in care. By extending the diversity of our fostering community, this approach will positively impact care-experienced young people, as through better matching of alternative homes, they should experience greater long-term stability and outcomes.
 - 5.3 Support for families within easy reach of home: sometimes children in care are moved away from their communities to live with a foster family from an independent fostering agency, as there are no locally available foster carers who are a good match. By increasing the number and diversity of locally available carers, more children will have the opportunity to remain living in their community, attending their local school and continuing to receive support from their local networks.
 - 5.4 Real opportunities for children with additional needs: as a region, we have agreed to prioritise the recruitment of carers who can love and care for children with additional needs. By increasing the number of locally available, skilled foster carers and extending our Mockingbird provision, we can reduce the likelihood of residential care for children with additional needs and help meet their aspirations for the future.
 - 5.5 A focus on services designed around residents: the pilot programme will take an iterative, 'test and learn' approach, improving the design and quality of experience that prospective foster carers receive by listening and acting on customer experience and involving foster carers in every step of the design and deliver of the new service.
6. Consultation
 - 6.1 Foster carers across the cluster have been invited to support the design and delivery of the recruitment hub. By January 2024, 17 carers had expressed their interest in getting involved. So far, carers have influenced the design of the recruitment hub through an online workshop considering "supporting prospective foster carers – what works?". Carers told us about the type of information they believe prospective carers need to receive right at the outset of their journey and considered what their role could be in supporting prospective carers through the assessment process. As a region, we have agreed to introduce a 'buddy system', matching prospective carers with experienced carers so they can start building supportive relationships and networks with other carers from the outset.
 - 6.2 Carers have taken part in a workshop designed to generate ideas for a name and 'strapline' for the new service; they have been asked to vote on the final choices and the option with the most votes will be the service name / strapline proposed to the Department for Education.
 - 6.3 Carers participate in the governance of the pilot, including membership of the Project Board and contributing via our Corporate Parenting Panel.

A carer also formed part of the recruitment panel for the Fostering Recruitment Hub Team Manager.

6.4 As we progress to delivery, further opportunities for carer engagement will include:

- Further development of the support offer;
- Mystery shopping to test how well the new service engages prospective carers at the point of initial enquiry;
- Testing website mock ups;
- Providing peer support to prospective carers on a self-employed basis; and,
- Participating in marketing events for the regional hub.

7. Implications

7.1 Finance, Value for Money and Risk

7.1.1 The Competition and Markets Authority review into Children's Social Care found that the prices paid by local authorities to independent fostering agencies (IFAs) were high and this, combined with growing numbers of looked-after children, was placing significant strain on local authority budgets, limiting their scope to fund other important activities in children's services and beyond. The purpose of this pilot programme is to increase the pool of local authority foster carers across northeast London; over time, this should reduce reliance on IFAs and reduce the strain on local authority budgets.

7.1.2 This pilot programme is funded by central government grants until March 2025. During this period, there is no expectation or requirement that the local authority contribute towards financing the pilot. Grants are subject to satisfactory progress in mobilising the programme and include:

- £664,523 to fund the regional recruitment hub
- £1,026,703 to fund the roll out and extension of Mockingbird across the region. Of this, £201,768 is allocated to LB Waltham Forest and the remaining £824,935 is allocated across the five other cluster local authorities.
- £266,676 to fund a high-profile regional marketing campaign.
- In total, this pilot programme will bring £1,957,902 of grant funding to recruit foster carers across the cluster.

7.1.3 The Department for Education (DfE) have set national targets for all clusters. All clusters are expected to secure a:

- 30% increase in enquires to become a foster carer per year by March 2026 (based on 2021/22 outturn), and;

- 20% increase in foster carer approvals per year by March 2026 (based on 2021/22 outturn).
- Locally, this means generating 1,320 enquiries to become a carers and 88 foster carer approvals per year by March 2026.
- The baseline year (2021/22) was atypical as fostering enquiries were particularly high because of continued coronavirus restrictions, including lockdowns. If the same DfE calculations are applied using 2022/23 as a baseline (a more typical year and post-coronavirus restrictions), then the target numbers reduce to 785 enquiries to become a carers and 65 foster carer approvals per year by March 2026.

7.1.4 Placing a child with an independent fostering agency (IFA) costs on average £850 - £950 (standard rate) per week. Fees for an equivalent arrangement with an LB Waltham Forest foster carer costs up to £519 per week in fostering fees, plus overheads / staffing costs. By reducing reliance on IFAs and increasing our in-house fostering capacity, spend on children's placements will reduce whilst increasing the number of children who are able to stay local to their school and wider family and community networks.

7.1.5 The service is scheduled to be operational from May 2024 and will be taking a 'test and learn', iterative approach to development. Grant funding ends in March 2025; therefore a decision on long term sustainability and potential joint funding for 2025/26 will need to be taken in Autumn 2024 by all cluster members, based on the evidence of impact established over the initial five to six months of operational activity. On average, it takes approximately eight months for a prospective foster carer to progress through the full application process so any 'return on investment' is likely to take a full financial year to take effect; the Project Board is developing proxy measures to inform this decision.

7.1.6 There is a risk that additional demand for fostering assessments exceeds capacity within the fostering service and additional costs are incurred through the use of independent assessors. To mitigate this risk, the volume of assessments will be monitored closely with the potential to bring in additional fixed term resource to fulfil demand.

7.1.7 In the medium to long term, there are opportunities to achieve economies of scale from a regional approach to fostering recruitment, including the potential pooling of local authority fostering promotion budgets and fostering recruitment staff.

7.1.8 Timescales for delivery are ambitious and carry several dependencies, including the capacity of the six partner local authorities to rapidly agree requirements for a case management system.

7.2 Legal

7.2.1 The Council has statutory responsibilities for fostering including under the Children Act 1989 and the Fostering Services (England) Regulations

2011. All statutory responsibilities remain with individual local authorities. Legal services have been engaged to support this project. A partnership agreement is under development to formalise arrangements.

7.2.2 The Council has the power under section 1 of the Localism Act 2011 to do anything (subject to certain exception) that an individual may generally do. It also has the power under section 111 Local Government Act 1972 to do an anything incidental to, or which facilitates or is conducive to the exercise of any other Council function. Entering into the partnership agreement as detailed in this report can therefore be agreed under these powers.

7.2.3 Section 1 of the Local Government (Contracts) Act 1997 provides that every statutory provision conferring or imposing a function on a local authority confers power on the local authority to enter into a contract with another person for the provision or making available of assets or services, or both, (whether or not together with goods) for the purposes of, or in connection with, the discharge of the function by the local authority.

7.2.4 Entering into the proposed partnership arrangements is in accordance with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules and the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (PCR 2015).

7.3 Equalities and Diversity

7.3.1 Children of all different backgrounds can be in care. In many cases, it can be beneficial for a child to be placed with foster carers who share their cultural background - however, due to the national shortage of foster carers, this is not always possible. The new service will prioritise the development of a fostering community across the northeast London cluster, formed by a diverse range of individuals from a range of different backgrounds, that reflect the local community. This approach will positively impact care-experienced young people as through better matching of alternative homes, they should experience greater long-term stability and outcomes.

7.4 Sustainability (including climate change, health, crime and disorder)

7.4.1 There are no negative environmental implications arising from this policy.

7.5 Council Infrastructure

7.5.1 There are no significant implications for the council's infrastructure. A bespoke case management system will be developed for the recruitment hub; personal and identifiable information will be shared across the northeast London cluster. Legal, Digital and Information Governance services are providing consultation and advice in this process.

Background Information (as defined by Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985)

None