


London Borough of Waltham Forest

Report Title	Regionalisation of Fostering Recruitment, Assessment and Support
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Meeting / Date	Cabinet, 2 June 2026
Cabinet portfolio	Councillor Daisy Richards, Portfolio Lead Member for Children and Young People



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Wards affected	None
Public access	Open
Appendices	Appendix 1 – EA Screener

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report asks Cabinet to approve the Council's continued participation in the Department for Education (DfE) *Renewing fostering: homes for 10,000 more children* programme and to agree the decisions set out in section 2, including Waltham Forest continuing as the lead local authority for the Local Community Fostering Recruitment Hub and delegation of decision making to enable timely implementation of the expanded end-to-end fostering remit.
- 1.2 Since May 2024, LB Waltham Forest has led delivery of the regional fostering recruitment service on behalf of Tower Hamlets, Redbridge and Havering. National reforms published in January 2026 expand the programme expectations so that regional hubs take responsibility for the full fostering recruitment and assessment pathway (enquiry to approval) to meet minimum requirements by 30 September 2026. This report summarises progress to date and the proposed approach to meet the new requirements, maintain access to DfE funding and improve regional fostering capacity and consistency.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Cabinet is recommended to
- 2.1.1 Approve LB Waltham Forest's continued involvement in Local Community Fostering, as one of the four Local Authorities within the region.

- 2.1.2 Approve LB Waltham Forest to continue to act as the lead Local Authority pending alternative arrangements or requirements of the programme.
- 2.1.3 Delegate authority to the Strategic Director, Children's Services in consultation with the Strategic Director of Resources, to progress and decide on the expansion of the scope and remit of the Local Community Fostering service, including the development of an end-to-end regional fostering recruitment and assessment model, in line with the Government's fostering reform agenda.

3. Proposals

- 3.1 Since May 2024, LB Waltham Forest has led the delivery of the regional fostering recruitment service for Tower Hamlets, Redbridge and Havering via the Local Community Fostering Recruitment hub. The hub delivers a regionalised approach to recruitment for prospective foster carers. There are currently 10 regional hubs nationally formed under this DfE initiated programme.
- 3.2 In January 2026, the government published *Renewing Fostering Reforms – Homes for 10,000 More Children*, setting out its vision to reverse the decline in foster carers and reform the fostering system. As part of these reforms, the remit of the fostering hub programme is expanded, with an expectation that regional hubs take responsibility for the end-to-end (enquiry to approval) foster carer recruitment process. The programme sets out a range of minimum requirements, while explicitly encouraging local areas to innovate and transform delivery to best meet local needs.
- 3.3 *Renewing Fostering* also sets out a longer-term ambition for local authorities to operate within Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs), responsible for planning, commissioning and delivering children's care placements across fostering, children's homes and secure provision. Through RCCs, the government expects local authorities to achieve stronger market oversight and place more children and young people closer to home. Work is currently underway in London to develop proposals for a pan-London RCC, with the reforms making clear that regional fostering hubs are expected, over time, to sit within their respective RCC arrangements.
- 3.4 Strategic discussions with partners show broad support for developing an end-to-end fostering model and there is consensus that continued engagement in the programme is essential to shaping a model that meets local needs and reflects the unique context of London authorities. In March 2026, Lead DCSs were invited to meet with the Children's Minister for direct discussions about the fostering reforms. These conversations provided an opportunity for the Minister to reaffirm his commitment and funding for the programme, as well as to reiterate the direction of travel towards a fully regionalised model for fostering recruitment and assessment within set timelines and requirements.

- 3.5 The regionalisation of fostering recruitment, assessment and support is expected to provide value for money through economies of scale in fostering recruitment, training, assessment and post-approval support. Specialist fostering support, digital marketing and specialist learning and development pathways become viable and affordable at a regional level, where these are difficult to fund at individual borough level. A service focused solely on customer service alongside rapid and safe fostering recruitment and assessment will improve enquiry-to-approval timeliness, increase conversion rates and reduce avoidable withdrawals, which are all costly to the system. Over time, increasing the supply of local foster carers and improving matching is expected to reduce reliance on high-cost independent fostering and residential placements. Transition costs are time-limited and offset by Department for Education funding, with progression to a steady-state model explicitly conditional on agreeing fair cost-sharing, full cost recovery and risk-management arrangements between partners.
- 3.6 Overall, the proposal represents more for the same in the short term (offset by DfE grant funding), moving to more for less over time, by investing in a more resilient, consistent and preventative fostering system that improves outcomes while strengthening long-term financial sustainability rather than delivering short-term cashable savings. The financial implications of remaining in the programme will require all partners to identify sufficient, long-term funding inclusive of the costs incurred by LB Waltham Forest as the lead to ensure full-cost recovery.
- 3.7 Given the pace and scale of national fostering reform, Cabinet is asked to delegate authority to the Strategic Director, Children's Services, in consultation with the Strategic Director of Resources, to progress and decide on the expansion of the scope and remit of the Local Community Fostering service, including the development of an end-to-end regional fostering recruitment and assessment model. The Department for Education has set a fixed delivery deadline of 30 September 2026, with grant funding release and future funding opportunities explicitly linked to timely implementation of the minimum requirements. Delivery within these timelines will require prompt, operationally agile decision-making across workforce, financial and service-design matters, which cannot be achieved through repeated Cabinet reporting. Without delegated authority, there is a material risk that necessary decisions cannot be taken quickly enough, resulting in failure to meet national deadlines and the consequent loss of agreed grant funding and access to future programme investment.

4. Options & Alternatives Considered

4.1 Option 1: continue as part of the Local Community Fostering regional service with LB Waltham Forest as the lead and further decision making delegated to the Strategic Director, Children's Services, in consultation with the Strategic Director of Resources (recommended)

4.1.1 As of the end of February 2026, the Local Community Fostering region had approved 54 households against a DfE end of year target of 49. The region has been recognised by the Children's minister as one of the top three performing fostering hub regions in the country in terms of approved foster households. Local data shows variation across the region in assessment timescales, thresholds and conversion rates, providing the opportunity for consistency and improved transparency across the region.

4.1.2 Continuing within the partnership places the Local Community Fostering partners at the forefront of regional collaboration and leadership in line with central governments direction of travel. This option enables all partners to continue to shape a model that reflects local needs while meeting emerging national requirements, ensuring influence over programme design rather than having a model imposed at a later date. Progressing at pace will increase the likelihood of further government investment, given the Minister's emphasis on supporting authorities leading the programme.

4.2 Option 2: continue as part of the Local Community Fostering regional service but with a different lead LA (not recommended)

4.2.1 LB Waltham Forest has led the programme since the initial DfE grant application in May 2023, with the service now fully operational, high-performing and nationally recognised, having exceeded its DfE approval targets.

4.2.2 Changing the lead authority at this stage would introduce significant transitional risk at a critical point in the programme's expansion, potentially disrupting delivery, delaying decision-making and diverting officer capacity away from service transformation, workforce alignment and performance improvement. Transferring lead authority functions would incur additional cost, officer time and complexity, including the need to renegotiate legal, financial, data-sharing and accountability arrangements, with no clear improvement in outcomes or value for money.

4.2.3 Central government has emphasised the importance of pace, stability and delivery, and a change in lead authority mid-programme could be perceived as destabilising, reducing confidence in the region's readiness to deliver the expanded end-to-end fostering remit and secure future funding. Strategic consideration of alternative leadership

arrangements would be more appropriately aligned with future Regional Care Cooperative governance decisions.

4.3 Option 3: exit the Local Community Fostering regional service (not recommended)

4.3.1 This would involve transferring the Lead LA role to another LA in the region as there is otherwise regional consensus to continue. Although membership of a regional hub is not currently mandated, exiting the programme would be a divergence away from the current fostering reforms and clear messaging from central government. Further it would inhibit our ability to access future funding which will be conditional on a regional model.

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

5.1 The development of a regional fostering recruitment service strongly aligns with Mission Waltham Forest, particularly the council's commitment to ensuring that every child can thrive and that families receive the right support at the right time.

5.2 Mission Waltham Forest emphasises transforming how the Council operates to deliver outcomes sustainably, including making effective use of public resources and maintaining financial resilience. Working regionally supports this by enabling economies of scale, reducing duplication and improving value for money. This approach complements the Families First programme, which focuses on early intervention, whole-family working and preventing unnecessary escalation into care, with a strong fostering system providing high-quality family homes where care is required and supporting stability, step-down and reunification.

5.3 By increasing the supply and diversity of local foster carers and strengthening local sufficiency, the regional approach supports Mission 1 (access to timely support for children and families) and Mission 6 (safety, stability and inclusion). Improving recruitment at scale enables more children to be cared for in stable, family-based placements closer to home, improving outcomes and reducing reliance on high-cost residential and independent provision, in line with the council's Children Looked After and Care Leavers Sufficiency Strategy. The proposals also support Mission 3 (living and ageing well) by strengthening foster carer support through consistent regional pathways, shared expertise and sustainable support models, helping to retain carers and build long-term capacity.

5.4 At a national and system level, the regional fostering recruitment service aligns with the Department for Education's *Renewing Fostering: Homes for 10,000 More Children* reforms and the longer-term ambition to establish Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs). Government has been clear that fostering hubs are expected to sit

within future RCC arrangements. Continued leadership therefore positions LB Waltham Forest to remain at the forefront of reform, maintain local influence over service design and ensure readiness for future RCC governance, while keeping the needs of Waltham Forest's children and families central.

6. Consultation

- 6.1 Between February and March 2026 the DfE opened consultation: [Fostering for the future: improving the foster care system](#) which will inform the *Renewing Fostering Reforms – Homes for 10,000 More Children* reforms.
- 6.2 The proposals set out in this report are aligned to the direction of travel set out in the DfE consultation and associated programme guidance. Recommendations are therefore subject to the outcome of the national consultation and any subsequent changes to statutory or policy requirements. The delegated authority sought at recommendation 2.1.3 will enable the Council to respond promptly to final DfE expectations once confirmed, while remaining compliant with emerging national guidance.
- 6.3 At a regional and local level, ongoing engagement has taken place with partner local authorities through established governance structures, including Director-level forums and programme delivery groups, to shape the development of an end-to-end regional fostering model. Strategic discussions show broad consensus that continued participation in the programme is essential to influence design, reflect the London context and meet national timelines.
- 6.4 The Local Community Fostering service has an established Foster Carer Advisory Group, which is actively involved in service design, development and delivery. Foster carers have participated in regional workshops to agree the core parameters and principles of a regional end-to-end fostering service, including the importance of relational practice, clear communication and early support. Their feedback directly informed the partnership's initial submission to the DfE, setting out how the region intends to meet the programme's minimum requirements while delivering local variation. The Advisory Group will continue to be engaged throughout 2026/27, including in forthcoming consultation activity on fostering innovation and service development.
- 6.5 Any further formal consultation required at a local level will be identified and undertaken as part of detailed programme design during 2026/27, in line with statutory requirements and best practice, including consultation with staff, foster carers and other stakeholders where proposals affect service delivery or workforce arrangements.
- 6.6 This matter has not been subject to pre-decision scrutiny. The relevant Scrutiny Committee will have the opportunity to consider the decision following Cabinet if it wishes to do so. Any comments or recommendations from Scrutiny, and the service response, will be appended to this report as appropriate.

7. Implications

7.1. Finance, Value for Money and Risk

- 7.1.1. The programme was fully grant funded in year 1 (2024/25), with funding reducing to 50% in year 2 (2025/26). From year 3 (2026/27), grant funding will reduce further to 25% of the existing model on the condition that the partnership moves to an 'end to end' model of regional delivery by 30 September.
- 7.1.2. The Department for Education (DfE) has made clear its expectation that local authorities share resources and pool budgets to implement and sustain the regional model. In practice, each partner authority will therefore need to release resourcing or efficiencies to maintain and / or extend the service on an ongoing basis.
- 7.1.3. The Department for Education will provide a Section 31 grant to support transition to the end-to-end fostering model; this funding is conditional on the partnership continuing to regionalise fostering recruitment and assessment in line with DfE minimum requirements. No further grant funding is available to maintain the existing service. The Section 31 grant includes £196,828 for transition costs and a further £196,828 to support the sustainability of the existing hub model. In addition, the partnership has received a £50,000 design payment to support the development of the end-to-end operating model. Separately, each partner local authority is eligible to receive £80,000 to support the development of its Mockingbird provision.
- 7.1.4. Current projections reflect a £103,376 surplus carried forward from 2025/26, which can be applied to offset costs in 2026/27. This surplus does not represent retained funding for LB Waltham Forest, but a shared balance held on behalf of the four partner authorities and available to support the regional model. In addition, LB Waltham Forest is holding approximately £135k of partner grant funding, also carried forward from 2025/26, pending agreement with partners on deployment. These amounts provide short-term financial flexibility but are time-limited and do not constitute a recurring funding source.
- 7.1.5. If the partnership decides to maintain the existing service 'as is', there is no further grant funding and all costs must be met by partners, or the service disbanded. Costs to maintain the existing service are estimated at £755,000, shared across four partners; for LB Waltham Forest, once the forecast surplus is offset, this requires a contribution of approximately £163,000 to maintain the 'business as usual' model.
- 7.1.6. If the hub is able to meet ambitious DfE performance targets, it would be expected that hub costs would be offset over time through reductions in spend on independent fostering agency placements.
- 7.1.7. However, the expansion of the regional model will increase the required annual contribution from each partner local authority from 2026/27 onwards. LB Waltham Forest does not currently have an identified or recurring budget to meet its contribution beyond 2025/26,

with the 2025/26 contribution having been met through in-year underspends.

- 7.1.8. Financial implications are not yet finalised, as they remain dependent on the detailed structure of the proposed regional model, which has not yet been confirmed. The service has provided assurances that the model will be fully funded from existing resources; however, this has not yet been quantified. As a result, there remains a potential financial risk if these assumptions are not realised or fully mitigated through future planning.
- 7.1.9. The full cost of service delivery will be established through the development of a sustainable operating model, with clear cost-sharing and financial risk-management arrangements agreed between partner authorities prior to any final decision to proceed. Services will need to be aligned so that each authority's share of the regional service does not exceed the cost currently incurred when delivering these functions individually, while maximising the economies of scale achieved through regional working and aligning with each partner's medium-term financial strategy.
- 7.1.10. As the lead authority, LB Waltham Forest carries a heightened financial exposure should partner authorities withdraw from the arrangement, vary their level of contribution or delay payment. This could result in unfunded liabilities, particularly in relation to staffing, fixed-term or agency contracts and exit or redundancy costs. Robust partnership agreements, including provisions on cost-sharing, risk-sharing, withdrawal and termination, will therefore be essential to protect the Council's financial position.
- 7.1.11. During transition to the end-to-end model, additional financial risks arise, including potential double-running costs while local and regional arrangements operate in parallel, reliance on interim staffing to maintain capacity, and the risk of delayed savings or contributions. There are also delivery-related financial risks, including capacity gaps, slower cross-authority decision-making, system or data migration issues, and disruption to applicants or carers that could delay conversion and sufficiency gains.
- 7.1.12. There is a further delivery-linked financial risk should DfE grant funding be reduced, delayed or clawed back as a result of missed delivery timelines or performance conditions, which could result in short-term affordability pressures for LB Waltham Forest as the accountable body.
- 7.1.13. The long-term sustainability of the regional model is dependent on ongoing partner contributions and the realisation of anticipated efficiencies. Reliance on DfE grant funding and prior-year underspends is time-limited, and failure to embed the model within partner authorities' medium-term financial strategies would increase future financial risk.
- 7.1.14. The partnership is also considering longer-term plans to move toward London-wide Regional Care Cooperative arrangements, including the

need for agreements to manage termination risks and associated costs arising from future statutory or structural change.

- 7.1.15. Participation in the end-to-end fostering hub programme enables access to future national funding opportunities not available to authorities operating outside the programme. This includes the DfE Fostering Innovation Fund (£12.4m nationally over two years), open only to Fostering Hubs and Regional Care Cooperatives, and the forthcoming 'Room Makers' fund, comprising up to £25m of capital funding and up to £1.5m of programme funding to support foster carers to safely increase capacity within their homes.

7.2. Legal

- 7.2.1. Legal Services have been engaged to support this work and a formal partnership agreement will be developed to set out the governance, funding, risk-sharing and accountability arrangements for both the transition period and the steady-state model.
- 7.2.2. Key legal considerations include ensuring the lawful delegation and exercise of fostering functions on a regional basis, including fostering assessments, panel arrangements and a regional Agency Decision Maker rota.
- 7.2.3. The significant Supreme Court case of *Armes v Nottinghamshire County Council* [2017] UKSC 60 confirmed that a local authority can be vicariously liable for abuse committed by foster parents, with the Court identifying the authority's approval, supervision and control over foster carers, the creation of a relationship of authority and trust, and the fact that foster carers are not an independent business, as factors justifying vicarious liability.
- 7.2.4. In the context of accelerated assessment timescales and potential removal of fostering panels under national reform proposals, there is a heightened need to ensure that safeguarding standards are not diluted, to mitigate risks of harm, substantial compensation claims, reputational damage, regulatory intervention and increased insurance costs. In addition in light of the vicarious liability exposure confirmed in the *Armes* case, insurance coverage should be reviewed, ensuring there is adequate protection for historic and future claims and consideration given to possible risk pooling arrangements.
- 7.2.5. The regional partnership will need to embed strengthened assessment, quality assurance and decision-making protocols to ensure defensible approvals by Agency Decision Makers, with clear audit trails and escalation routes for complex or borderline cases. Given the expansion of regional hub responsibilities and the DfE intention to introduce a new performance framework for hubs, clear governance and accountability are required when functions are pooled regionally.
- 7.2.6. Legal advice will ensure compliance with the Children Act 1989, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and associated statutory guidance, with clear documentation of decision-making

authority, accountability, liability and escalation routes for each partner authority. Information-sharing and data-governance arrangements will also be updated to ensure compliance with UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018, including clear controller/processor roles, secure data access and transparency for applicants and foster carers. Regional collaboration requires GDPR-compliant data sharing frameworks, clear contractual definitions of roles, responsibilities and liabilities, and unambiguous safeguarding responsibilities when functions are pooled .

- 7.2.7. All legal agreements will be subject to formal legal review and sign-off prior to implementation.
- 7.2.8. 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 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.

7.3. Equalities and Diversity

- 7.3.1. Children from a wide range of backgrounds and with different protected characteristics come into care. In many cases, it can be beneficial for a child to be placed with foster carers who share aspects of their cultural, religious or lived experience; however, due to the national shortage of foster carers, this is not always possible. The proposed regional service will prioritise the development of a fostering community across the Local Community partnership, made up of a diverse range of carers reflective of the local communities served, with targeted recruitment activity designed to widen participation and address under-representation.
- 7.3.2. This approach supports the Council's Public Sector Equality Duty by seeking to advance equality of opportunity and promote good relations, while ensuring that placement decisions remain child-centred and based on individual needs rather than characteristics alone. By increasing the overall pool of foster carers and improving sufficiency at scale, the regional model will strengthen opportunities for better matching and culturally informed care where appropriate, and will reduce the risk of children experiencing unnecessary placement moves. This is expected to support improved stability, wellbeing and long-term outcomes for care-experienced children and young people.

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

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

- 7.4.2. The proposals support community safety by improving family-based care stability and the availability of local foster care, helping to reduce known risk factors associated with exploitation, repeat harm and criminal involvement among children and young people in foster care. Increased local capacity supports early stability and protective relationships, aligning with violence reduction and safeguarding priorities.
- 7.4.3. In line with the Council's Health and Wellbeing Sustainability Matrix and the Marmot principles, the proposal is expected to have a positive impact on reducing health inequalities for children and families. By increasing the supply, stability and diversity of local foster carers, the regional model supports giving children and young people the best possible start in life through access to stable, family-based care closer to home. Improving timeliness, consistency and quality across the foster carer recruitment and assessment pathway enables carers to maximise their capabilities and exercise greater control through clearer information, earlier support and reduced attrition. The strengthened focus on early stability and sufficiency contributes to preventing escalations into more restrictive or unstable family-based care, supporting emotional wellbeing and reducing longer-term demand on health, social care and criminal justice services. By reducing reliance on distant and high-cost family-based care, the proposals also support healthier and more sustainable communities, mitigate known drivers of poor mental health outcomes for care-experienced children, and contribute to prevention-focused approaches that align with the Council's commitment to narrowing unfair and avoidable health inequalities.

7.5. Council Infrastructure

- 7.5.1. The proposals involve changes to roles and ways of working, both within the regional service and within local authority fostering teams. For the regional service, HR implications include the extension of existing roles, the creation of a limited number of new posts and potential changes to reporting lines.
- 7.5.2. Staffing solutions are expected to include secondments, fixed-term appointments and targeted recruitment, supported by early engagement with staff and recognised trade unions in line with the Council's HR policies. There is no current assumption of compulsory redundancies. Funding for regional staffing will need to be met from within existing fostering service resources across partner authorities, and HR advice is being sought on the most appropriate and lawful staffing options to support transition and longer-term sustainability.
- 7.5.3. Effective workforce planning, clear communication and appropriate training will be essential to maintain service continuity, retain experienced staff and support wellbeing during transition. HR advice will continue to be obtained to ensure compliance with employment law, job evaluation and consultation requirements, including arrangements spanning multiple local authorities. Workforce impacts

will be kept under review as the programme progresses and as the end-to-end model is further defined.

7.5.4. There are no significant implications for the council's accommodation or IT infrastructure. A bespoke case management system was developed for the existing regional service and this system can quickly and easily be extended to incorporate the full fostering assessment process. Personal and identifiable information will be shared across the Local Community Fostering partnership in line with an update Privacy Policy. 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