

Minutes of the meeting of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee held at Conference Room 1 - Herefordshire Council, Plough Lane Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Tuesday 7 May 2024 at 2.00 pm

Present: Councillor Toni Fagan (Chairperson)
Councillor Liz Harvey (Vice-chairperson, remote attendance)

Councillors: Robert Highfield, Jim Kenyon, Ben Proctor and Richard Thomas (substitute)

Co-Opted: Sam Pratley (Diocese of Hereford), Anna Eccleston (Parent Governor Primary)

In attendance: Councillor Ivan Powell (Cabinet Member Children and Young People)

Officers: Simon Cann (Clerk/Democratic Services Officer), Gail Hancock (Service Director Corporate Parenting), Jaswinder McAndrew (Acting Head of Service Fostering & Adoption) and Danial Webb (Statutory Scrutiny Officer)

196. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Clare Davies, Councillor Rob Williams, Jan Frances and Stuart Mitchell.

197. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillor Richard Thomas substituted for Councillor Rob Williams.

198. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

199. MINUTES

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 March 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

200. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Questions received and responses given are attached as appendix 1 to the minutes.

201. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

No questions were received from members of the council.

202. CHAIR UPDATE

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer provided updates on:

- 30 May 2024 - a scrutiny day to consider the work of the council over the next 12 months.
- 26 June 2024 - a thematic work programming meeting.
- MASH visit with date to be confirmed.

203. INTRODUCTION TO FOSTERING

The Service Director for Corporate Parenting gave an overview of the report and presented a series of [slides](#) providing an introduction to fostering. The key areas covered during the presentation were:

- Introduction to Herefordshire Fostering Service
- Staffing in the Service
- Service Re-Alignment
- Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team
- Fostering Recruitment Developments
- Connected Persons and Special Guardian Team
- Fostering Support Team
- The Home Finding Team
- Herefordshire Fostering Panel

The Chair invited comments and questions from The Committee, the principle points of discussion are summarised below:

1. The Committee explained it had invited comments from foster carers, a sample part of a statement was read out, which highlighted the frustration of a foster carer couple who had handed their notice in due to their concerns about the handling of children's care not being listened to or acted on.
2. The Committee raised concerns about approved carers with no placements being ready to go, but not getting any placements, and raised the question of who was responsible for placement allocation and how the process worked.
3. The Committee suggested that the voice of the carer was not always heard and that there were historic instances involving complaints where the word of children and social workers had been believed over foster carers with 30 years of fostering experience.
4. The Committee emphasised the need for additional fostering support workers.
5. The Committee highlighted a need to ensure that the system for council tax exemption for kinship carers treated existing carers fairly and that kinship carers were paid a fair amount for the work they carried out.
 - The Service Director for Corporate Parenting explained that the issues around council tax exemption for kinship carers had been brought to their attention two days after starting in the role on 8 April 2024. Meetings regarding how to address the differentials between kinship and foster carer council tax exemptions had taken place with the chief executive and cabinet member and a report on the matter was expected on 16 May 2024.
 - The Service Director expressed disappointment at the negative feedback the Committee had received from foster carers. A number of consultation groups had been held during the drafting of the improvement plan and it was acknowledged that improvements and developments were starting from a very low base.
 - The Service Director pointed out that the previous Interim Head of Service had met with as many foster carers as was possible in order to hear directly from them. This information had been escalated and it was acknowledged that there was a real need to rebuild trust and confidence within the service.

- Rebuilding trust and confidence in the service was an ongoing process and feedback would continue to be invited. Assurance was given that when difficult truths were highlighted the service would listen to and respond to them.
 - Supervising social workers who are qualified social workers were expected as a national minimum requirement, but the service had and was looking to recruit additional support workers.
6. The Committee enquired about how the ratios of permanent/agency social workers and support workers were determined.
 - The Service Director for Corporate Parenting explained that the case load of a supervising social worker was set around the number of approved foster care households that the service needed to provide support for.
 - The Service Director pointed out that a workforce strategy was in place and one of its aims was to stabilise the fostering service with a view to greatly increasing the percentage of permanent staff from the current figure of 65%.
 - The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People pointed out that there were ongoing considerations and discussions about the profile of the workforce, including the numbers and mix of qualified social workers and family support workers. The number and mix correlated to the current workload and social workers had to be involved in particular cases in certain circumstances.
 - The Cabinet Member explained that the best way to get the balance and mix of the workers right was to make sure that caseloads were appropriate and manageable.
 - For the purpose of clarity the Service Director for Corporate Parenting highlighted the distinction between supervising social workers for foster carers, and social workers allocated to children.
 - It was noted that in the fostering service there were social workers who were dedicated to the support and supervision of foster carers and foster carer households, these were separate to the allocated social workers for the children and young people in the council's care. National minimum standards required that supervising social workers were allocated where required, whereas support workers were not required in the same way - although the service was attempting to develop these roles.
 7. The Committee noted concerns that kinship carers were not always as prepared for their role as foster carers and needed as much support as was available.
 8. The Committee applauded the work of the fostering social workers it had met through Fostering Panel meetings, but identified a problem regarding communications and liaisons between social workers for children and social workers for fosterers.
 9. The Committee highlighted concerns about the correct channels for passing on information that the Fostering Panel came across that was important, but outside of its remit.
 10. The Committee raised concerns about how and why certain factors, such as housing, influenced decisions made in relation to the approval of foster carers.
 11. The Committee explained it had been asked by members of the fostering panel to enquire about further detail regarding the Fostering Recruitment Strategy.
 12. The Committee noted that the Fostering Panel did not have a permanent base and asked if the service could invest in providing a home for the Fostering Panel, which could be used not just for panel meetings, but also meeting carers, liaison meetings and training sessions.
 - The Service Director for Corporate Parenting explained that part of the role of the Panel Advisor was about ensuring liaison and communication between the panel and the service took place, including training needs of the panel members and the recruitment programme. The Interim Head of

- Service for Fostering would be working closely with the Panel Advisor to ensure there was clear communication between all parties.
- The Service Director for Corporate Parenting explained that there were national minimum standards for approving foster carers and all local authorities would need to ensure that those standards were met, examples would include factors such as household type and bedroom space. However the service would always be open to feedback about how the standards were being applied.
13. The committee highlighted that there could be a potential power imbalance between foster carers and the service, which prevented the carers coming forward with issues.
 14. The Committee enquired as to what mechanisms, such as foster carer trade union recognition, were in place for foster carers to raise concerns?
 - The Interim Head of Service for Fostering explained that there were foster carer representatives who met with her, team managers and fostering team managers on a monthly basis to take questions, queries and concerns from foster carers.
 - Carer representatives meetings took place on every third Thursday of the month, the service was focused on building these relationships with a view to having representatives involved in planning events, taking part in recruitment campaigns and being ambassadors.
 - The service also held an all-foster carer meeting every two months, where foster carers could meet with the service, suggest and discuss agenda items and share any concerns they had.
 15. The Committee pointed out that it had been told one of the foster carer representatives was leaving because their concerns were not be listened to and asked how many people had left the fostering service in the last 12 months and how many had been recruited.
 - The Interim Head of Service for Fostering explained they didn't have the exact figures to hand and would get back to the Committee with that data.
 16. The Committee raised concerns that it had heard carers and representatives leaving the service were not being thanked for their work or asked why they were leaving and what could be done to make them stay.
 17. The Committee expressed an interest in attending a foster carer representative meeting in the future.
 18. The Committee noted there was foster carer conference due to be held at the Shell Stores on 15 May 2024.
 19. The Committee enquired if there had been any external support in the review of the fostering service and had there been any feedback or an action plan coming from it.
 - The Service Director for Corporate Parenting said there had recently been feedback from a Department for Education funded piece of research called 'Fostering Link Service'.
 - An independent consultant undertook a diagnostic review of fostering specifically in relation to recruitment and approval, the service expected a written report from this review, which would form the basis of a refresh of the fostering recruitment pathway and programme.
 20. The Committee enquired if the service was aware of work being done by other local authorities that could be used as a best practice benchmark for retention of existing foster carers.
 - The Service Director for Corporate Parenting referred back to the Department of Education funded research and explained that phase two would allow the service to obtain support and intervention to assist in addressing any issues that had been raised. This would include adopting examples of best practice from other places to refresh and revise the service's approach.

21. The Committee asked if there had been any input from partners at Leeds Council in relation to fostering.
 - The Service Director for Corporate Parenting said Leeds would be supporting implementation of any recommendations coming out of the Department for Education diagnostic review.
22. The Committee enquired, whether there was a way of knowing if children in the care of the service were safe.
23. The Committee asked if there was any evidence to support the idea that in-house care was better than using external agencies and sought assurance that value for money wasn't being put ahead of securing the right placement for individuals.
24. The Committee asked why more people were prepared to lend their services to an external agency rather than the local authority, was it about money or the image of the local authority.
 - The Service Director for Corporate Parenting explained that in terms of safeguarding, the service had received four Ofsted monitoring visits that had reviewed quality assurance and case work in respect of children and people in the council's care - none of those visits led to cases being escalated due to safeguarding concerns. Independent Reviewing Officers also reviewed care plans and placements of children.
 - It was pointed out that in relation to decisions being made, value for money was a factor, but it was not the only factor and considering the profile of the needs, risks and circumstances of a child drove the search for an appropriate match with a foster carer. Value for money was a consideration, but the needs of the child would always be paramount.
 - Where possible, needs of the child would be met by in-house foster carers, but there were some circumstances where needs could not be met in-house and external provision would be used.
25. The Committee enquired as to whether children being cared for by external providers were on the services radar.
 - The Service Director for Corporate Parenting assured the Committee that children in a care placement with an independent fostering agency would receive the same standards in respect of being allocated a social worker and dedicated Independent Reviewing Officer. There was no differential that would adversely impact a child placed with an external provider.
26. The Committee asked for details about foster care for children that came from out of county.
 - The Service Director for Corporate Parenting explained that if children were fostered with an independent fostering agency in Herefordshire, the statutory responsibility for that child's care would remain with their placing local authority, it would not transfer to Herefordshire. There were formal statutory notifications for when Herefordshire would place a child in care in another local authority and vice versa.
27. The Committee asked what actions were taken following feedback obtained from foster carers acquired during the drafting of the Improvement Plan in 2022, and how might existing foster carers see things as being different because of those actions.
 - The Service Director for Corporate Parenting explained that following the feedback, foster carer and foster carer representative meetings, newsletters and a tighter training programmes had been put in place and that there had been nothing like that back in 2022.
 - The key elements of a framework of support were missing/fractured back in 2022 and these had now been put in place. However, the service director acknowledged that many foster carers would still need to experience the changes before being able to move forward. Foster care ambassadors and champions would help with this process, but there was still much work to do.

- The Interim Head of Service for Fostering pointed to the recommissioning of HIPPS (Herefordshire Intensive Placement Support Service), which was providing a service called 'Safer Connections' that offers a broad intensive therapeutic service to support foster carers and children in their care.
 - There had been agreement for a psychologist to be recruited within the fostering service, so that children who couldn't receive support from CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) could receive help.
28. The Committee enquired about the mechanisms in place to enable two-way channels of communication between the voice of the carer/voice of the child with the service.
29. The Committee asked about what kind of wraparound service was available for carers/children experiencing problems outside of normal working hours.
30. The Committee enquired about the outcomes of reviews of the Fostering Service Capacity and Capability and the Sufficiency Strategy as referenced in the Improvement Plan from November 2023.
- The Service Director for Corporate Parenting explained that the outcome of the workforce review was about addressing the instability within the fostering service workforce, the strategy had been about building the permanent workforce in order to grow stability and use that as a platform to recruit additional permanent staff. Permanence within the management group was also expected to push things forward in terms of recruiting permanent practitioners. Internal processes to support the payment of external providers had been addressed and strengthened, which had historically been a cause of problems.
 - The sufficiency strategy had explored in-house residential provision, a tendering process had progressed and by January/February 2025 there should be some in-house residential provision.
 - The Interim Head of Service for Fostering pointed out that in relation to the Sufficiency Strategy the service had been looking at its marketing strategy to see how it could improve the number of foster carers. This included targeted marketing campaigns, virtual information meetings, local events and increasing visibility via improved standing within Google searches.
 - It was pointed out that the service now had a marketing officer.
31. The Committee were pleased to see a specific page on the council's website encouraging people from the LGBTQ+ community to consider becoming foster carers and suggested that the invitation and encouragement could be extended to other minority groups.
- The Service Director for Corporate Parenting pointed out that Herefordshire Council was a fostering friendly employer and that it would be good to encourage large employers from, for the private, health and police sectors to consider becoming fostering friendly as well - to promote and encourage as much diversity as possible within the local community.
32. The Committee requested that an account of the 7 May meeting be provided to social workers in the Herefordshire Council fostering service.
33. The Committee suggested that an elected member be appointed as a fostering champion to represent foster carers and act as a trusted representative inside and outside of the council who would provide foster carers with a voice.
34. The Committee noted that there were currently 168 fostering households in the county and wanted to understand what the target was for the next few years.
- The Service Director for Corporate Parenting explained the target for new fostering households was six per quarter/24 per year.
35. The Committee raised concerns about the potential disconnect between the marketing officer and corporate resources.

- The Service Director for Corporate Parenting gave an assurance that the strategy ensured there was built in connectivity between the marketing officer and corporate communications team.
36. The Committee noted the work done by the Diocese of Hereford in recruiting 334 host families in 18 months to provide 800 adults and 370 children from the Ukraine with a place to live. It was suggested that although the setup and requirements were different, the service could look at how those families were recruited in such quick time and if that model of recruitment could provide lessons for the fostering service. It was also suggested that the service could investigate approaching the 334 families to see if they would be interested in fostering in the future.
37. The Committee asked if The Interim Head of Service for Fostering had any final comments before closing the item.
- The Interim Head of Service for Fostering acknowledged the difficulties of the past and hoped that the service could move forward and meet the challenges discussed in the meeting.

Resolved: The committee voted unanimously to recommend that Herefordshire Council:

- 1. Appoints and promotes an elected member champion for foster carers.**
- 2. Works with the Diocese of Hereford to promote fostering to families who had accommodated Ukrainian families.**
- 3. Works with the Diocese of Hereford to learn lessons from their successful accommodation of Ukrainian families.**
- 4. Provides an account of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee of 7 May 2024 to social workers in the fostering service.**
- 5. Provides a permanent home for the fostering panel and related activities.**
- 6. Amends its internet pages to ensure that the council encourages recruitment of foster parents from a diverse range of foster carer households.**

204. WORK PROGRAMME

The committee would be holding a work programming session on 26 June 2024.

205. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Thursday 13 June 2024, 2pm

206. APPENDIX 1. PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES AND SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Questioner:	Anonymous, Herefordshire
Scrutiny Meeting:	7 May 2024
Question:	Are Herefordshire Children's Services biased towards mum and why do dads not get the same help and support that mum's do?
Response:	The Children Act 1989 refers to parents, not mothers or fathers. The assessment of parents is determined by their capacity to meet the needs of their children. Help and support provided by Children's Services should be inclusive of both fathers and mothers. There is a positive impact on children when fathers have a positive and caring relationships with them so it is important to promote a 'Think Family' approach whereby

the inclusion of fathers, as well as mothers, will help to achieve the best outcomes for the children.

In practice, this means a child's father should be encouraged to engage and participate in assessments, planning and reviews about help and support. Children's Services do not consciously seek to disadvantage fathers or show unfair bias towards mothers at the expense of father and if there is a cause for concern it should be raised with the allocated social worker and their line manager so this can be considered and addressed.

Questioner:	Ms Maggie Steel, Hereford
Scrutiny Meeting:	7 May 2024
Question:	If a member of the public has safeguarding concerns over a foster carer or a kinship carer, is the fostering panel made aware of those concerns?
Response:	<p>The Fostering Panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements. It carries out a rigorous quality assurance function and promotes thorough assessments, support and training for foster carers. As part of this function, the panel oversees the conduct of assessments and annual reviews of approved foster carers.</p> <p>Any allegations about safeguarding concerns in respect of a foster carer, including a kinship carer (also known as 'Connected' or 'Family and Friends Carers'), raised by anyone, including a member of the public, will be responded to in accordance with established multi-agency Child Protection Procedures to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children. The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) will also work with multi-agency partners and employers, to manage allegations about people who work with children in paid or unpaid positions, including foster carers.</p> <p>Allegations made about foster carers will necessitate an early fostering review and the matter being referred to the Fostering Panel to consider the continuing suitability to foster. The supervising social worker for the foster carer and/or the children's allocated social worker will inform the Fostering Panel about safeguarding issues regarding the foster carer for the Fostering Panel to consider during the foster carer's annual review. The Fostering Panel can subsequently make a recommendation to the Agency Decision Maker which could include the recommendation to terminate the foster carer's approval.</p>

Questioner:	Ms Donna Conway, Leominster
Scrutiny Meeting:	7 May 2024
Question:	<p>On page 6 of the presentation about fostering in Herefordshire it states this:</p> <p><i>"Development of the recruitment strategy through the successful retention of current Foster Carers who will champion and promote becoming a Herefordshire Foster Carer, including a <u>£500 referral scheme</u> for Foster Carers."</i></p> <p>What assessment procedures and safeguards are in place to ensure that all foster carers and kinship carer applicants, those selected and retained are safe to care for children?</p>
Response:	<p>The recruitment of foster carers is in line with the Department of Education's Fostering Services National Minimum Standards. Careful recruitment and regular monitoring of carers by our Fostering Service is designed to prevent unsuitable carers from being recruited and having the opportunity to harm children or to place them at risk. The relevant authorities are informed of any concerns about inappropriate adults. The recruitment, assessment, preparation, training and support of foster carers by our Fostering Service has a strong focus on child protection and keeping children safe, including help to ensure that children living in foster homes are safe, and feel safe. Foster carers are reviewed annually by the Fostering Panel who will make appropriate recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker.</p>

Questioner:	Ms Reid, Hereford
Scrutiny Meeting:	7 May 2024
<p>Question: I refer the presentation ‘An introduction to Fostering’ (Agenda Item 8). According to a Freedom of Information request the average cost of <u>one child</u> in care for <u>one year</u> was in January 2023:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-house Fostering: over £16,000 • Private Fostering (Independent Fostering Agencies, IFAs): over £46,000 • Children's homes: over £260,000 <p>It is very likely that costs have increased since then.</p> <p>I understand that in Herefordshire the rate of children privately fostered is high compared with rate of “Statistical Neighbours” or nationally. Also, the rates of looked-after children and children in children’s homes are high.</p> <p>Inter alia, looked-after children's costs can be reduced by reuniting children with their families and encouraging private fosterers to become in-house fosterers. How will the council reduce the costs?</p>	
<p>Response: We currently have only one child who is subject to ‘Private Fostering’. This is not high; our numbers remain very low, and we suspect this is due to under-reporting which is a challenge for many local authorities and partnerships. ‘Private Fostering’ is a different arrangement to that of a looked after child. A privately fostered child is a child under 16 (or 18 if disabled) who is cared for by an adult who is not a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, stepparent (including civil partnerships), sister or brother where the child is to be cared for in that person's home for 28 days or more. These placements are subject to checks to ensure the child is safe; Private Fostering arrangements are not paid for by the Local Authority.</p> <p>Our current Placement Sufficiency Strategy seeks to recruit more local in-house foster carers and improve working relationships with providers in order to increase choice and value for money. We are also seeking prevent children entering care with expansion and development of our Edge of Care and Home (ECHO) Service.</p> <p>Whilst Children’s Services seeks to manage children’s placements as part of the agreed financial savings strategy for 2024/25, it is important to ensure that the needs, risks and circumstances of children are paramount and that, where possible, we continue to reunify children with their families, where it is safe to do so. In the last year, 22 children have been reunified with their parents. A further 22 children are living with their parents under a Care Order (Placement with Parents Regulations). These children’s plans are subject to ongoing review and, when it is appropriate to do so, we will apply to the court for a discharge of their care orders.</p>	

Questioner:	Ms Donna Conway, Leominster
Scrutiny Meeting:	7 May 2024
<p>Supplementary Question:</p> <p>If the Police were to make an urgent MASH referral about an approved foster carer because of concerns the police held about the risk of child sexual abuse to the children in his/her care, is the Foster Panel made aware of those police concerns, and if so, are these concerns mediated to the Foster Panel by the LA’s social workers or by the police directly?</p>	
<p>Response: Local safeguarding partners, including the Police, process responses to safeguarding referrals via the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). Agency checks and child protection enquiries will be undertaken in accordance with established child</p>	

protection procedures upon receipt of concerns and allegations. The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) will also be involved in co-ordinating a response about an adult who works with children, in a paid or unpaid capacity, when there is concern they may have behaved in a way that caused harm to a child. The Fostering Panel is made aware of relevant findings which may affect the Foster Carer's approval status and regular reviews are also undertaken on an annual basis.

Questioner:	Ms Reid, Hereford
Scrutiny Meeting:	7 May 2024

Supplementary Question:

My original public question included:

“... the average cost of one child in care for one year was in January 2023:

- In-house Fostering: over £16,000
- Private Fostering (Independent Fostering Agencies, IFAs): over £46,000”

And:

“I understand that in Herefordshire the rate of children privately fostered is high compared with rate of “Statistical Neighbours” or nationally.”

The response stated:

“We currently have only one child who is subject to ‘Private Fostering’.”

To clarify, I understand that the rate of children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies by Herefordshire Council is higher than the rate of similar areas.

This suggests poor working relationships etc with past, potential, and current in-house foster carers. How will the rate of in-house foster carers be increased at pace?

Response: To confirm, Private Fostering and Independent Fostering Agency (IFAs) arrangements are not the same. The response to this supplementary question assumes that the focus is actually about the use of IFAs, as opposed to Private Fostering. Performance data shared with Scrutiny Committee members on 7 May 2024, reported that there were;

- 386 children in our care, and of these:
 - 78 were cared for by Kinship/Connected Carers (20%)
 - 204 were cared for by Foster Carers (53%), of which 95 were with in-house carers; and 109 were with IFAs

The supplementary question asserts that the number of children being cared for by IFAs indicates a poor working relationship with in-house foster carers, in the past, currently and in respect of potential new Foster Carers. It is acknowledged that after the Ofsted inspection in July 2022, rebuilding trust and confidence with Herefordshire's approved foster carers was a priority, and continues to be so.

Progress has been made during the intervening period and the recent Foster Carer Fortnight which took place between 13 to 26 May 2024, received very positive feedback about the programme of events and activities. This included the Annual Foster Carer Conference, the first for several years, which received a very positive evaluation from Foster Carers. By harnessing a more relational and restorative approach, the Fostering

Service is demonstrating its commitment to working collaboratively and harnessing the knowledge, skills and experience of our Foster Carers. Evidence shows that Foster Carers are some of the most effective fostering champions who can encourage and support others to begin fostering.

There are several enquiries, assessments and approvals currently going through the process to meet the annual target. The existing Foster Carer Recruitment Campaign is being refreshed with the benefit of Department for Education (DfE) funded research, which provided an independent diagnostic about Herefordshire's Foster Care recruitment and approval practice. Phase 1 of this research has already provided beneficial feedback and recommendations and Phase 2 will offer best practice support and intervention, which is currently being negotiated. It is anticipated that this will provide independent expertise and support to assist the Fostering Service to maintain focus and develop at pace.

The meeting ended at 16:50

Chairperson

