

## **AGENDA ITEM**

### **REPORT TO CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD**

**DATE 13<sup>th</sup> February 2026**

### **REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

## **Family Placement Service – Performance Overview**

### **PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

This report is to provide Corporate Parenting Board with an update in respect of the work of the Family Placement Service for the period 1 April 2025 – 31 December 2025.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Corporate Parenting Board is requested to:

### **CONTEXT**

1. The Family Placement Service is responsible for preparing, assessing, supervising, supporting, and training both prospective and approved foster carers and kinship carers. The service also supports the Regional Recruitment Hub, Foster with North East, with the marketing and recruitment of foster carers and has responsibility for recruiting and assessing Supported Lodgings Hosts.
2. The service is organized into three specialist teams, working closely together, and in partnership with other internal and external services, to ensure that foster carers are well trained, supported and able to provide safe, stable and nurturing homes for children and young people, both in care and within kinship arrangements.
3. Leading the start of the fostering journey, the Recruitment and Assessment Team focuses on marketing activity to attract new foster carers for children, and Supported Lodgings Hosts for young people aged 16+, the preparation, training and assessment of foster carers, kinship carers, and special guardians. The two post approval teams then go on to provide ongoing training, support, and supervision, the first for mainstream foster carers and the second for kinship carers.

### **PERFORMANCE**

4. During the reporting period, the Family Placement Service has maintained a strong overall level of performance despite operating within the context of sustained placement sufficiency pressures, increasing complexity of need and workforce capacity challenges.
5. Overall compliance with statutory requirements has remained robust. Foster care reviews have consistently been completed within statutory timescales, with only

isolated delays attributable to oversight rather than systemic issues. Safer caring policies and home safety checks have remained up to date, with any outstanding requirements linked to carers who were temporarily on hold or not actively fostering. Unannounced visits have also been consistently completed, with no visits outstanding at the end of reporting periods.

6. Assessment performance has been mixed. There have been 19 fostering enquiries during the period, however, only 6 progressed to a fostering assessment. Reasons for enquiries not progressing include the enquirer withdrawing due to having short term family commitments, having a conflict of interest as a result of their employment, general work or family commitments or simply cancelling the initial visit without providing a reason. The fostering service also ruled out some enquiries due to issues including poor home conditions, dangerous dogs, recent Children's Services involvement with their own children and new partner relationships. Three of the enquiries which progressed to assessment were also withdrawn; 2 by the applicant due to personal circumstances and 1 on the advice of the fostering service due to concerns around the safety of a family pet. There have been 3 mainstream foster carers approved during the period; 2 of the assessments were completed within timescale but the 3rd (a transfer from an IFA) was delayed by the applicants, who were going through an appeal process with their fostering agency. Despite introduction of the Regional Recruitment Hub, the number of mainstream approvals has remained low (1 less than the same period for 2024), reflecting reduced enquiry levels and the complexity of applicants coming forward. 13 foster carers have resigned during the period, therefore, sufficiency of mainstream foster carers continues to decline. 6 carers retired, 1 transferred to another local authority and 6 resigned for personal reasons including changes in employment, caring responsibilities within their family and the needs of young people who had remained living in the foster home in a staying put arrangement.
7. Performance in relation to connected and kinship care assessments has been significantly impacted by volume and complexity. Across the reporting period there has been a sustained increase in referrals for connected carer viability and full fostering assessments, often driven by court timescales and placement pressures. During the Sept to December 2024 period there were 19 referrals for a full fostering assessment, however, for the corresponding period in 2025, this had increased by 100% to 38. While many assessments have been completed within timescale, an increasing proportion (61%) have exceeded statutory timescales due to factors including delays in statutory checks (DBS, medicals, and CAF/CASS information) and the complexity of family circumstances. Staffing capacity has also had a significant impact as the team have had 2 FTE vacancies for an extended period of time and 1 FTE member of the team on long term sick. Positively, the vacant roles have been recruited to with anticipated start dates of 1 March 2026 and some temporary capacity was successfully achieved mid-December.
8. Despite these pressures, the service has continued to prioritise safeguarding and regulatory compliance, ensuring that where assessments exceeded timescales, risks were identified, monitored and managed appropriately through supervision, Head of Service and Service Lead management oversight and panel processes. All connected care arrangements, which become unregulated are also subject to 6 weekly oversight within Care Planning Panels to ensure they remain safe and appropriate.
9. 19 children have been made subject to special guardianship orders to their former foster carer during this reporting period. Whilst the majority of these were achieved during initial care proceedings, 4 of these children had been looked after for a

significant period of time and it is positive to note that their foster carers were confident to seek parental responsibility and provide children with permanence.

10. There are currently 103 children in matched long term foster placements. The service is currently family finding for 8 children who require long term placements; of those 8, 3 potential matches are being explored. 12 children have been matched long term at Fostering Panel during this period.

## CHALLENGES

11. Placement sufficiency has remained the most significant challenge throughout the reporting period. Demand for placements has consistently exceeded available capacity, particularly for long-term fostering, older children and young people, sibling groups and step down from residential care. This is a challenge for both inhouse and independent fostering services resulting in children, at times, waiting a long time for an appropriate home or going to live with carers who have not always had the skills or capacity to meet their needs.
12. Assessment capacity has been a further challenge. The Recruitment and Assessment Team has experienced sustained pressure due to high volumes of connected and kinship care assessments, staffing vacancies and sickness. This has resulted in a growing number of unallocated assessments and increased risk of assessments exceeding statutory timescales.
13. The increased use of exemptions and variations to terms of approval, while necessary to maintain placement sufficiency, has also increased pressure on carers and heightened risk within the system of carer burnout, placement disruption as well as less opportunity to match children both to the skills of the foster family and the needs of the other children in the household.
14. Maintaining a fully staffed service has also presented a challenge; the Recruitment and Assessment Team has had 2 FTE vacant posts and the Kinship Team 2, 22 hour posts for several months. This has corresponded with a significant increase in referrals for kinship assessments and an increase in transfers of kinship carers into the post approval team leading to unallocated assessments and an increase in unregulated family placements due to statutory timescales not being met. Work is being undertaken to consider each child on an individual basis and to review the appropriateness of connected foster carer arrangements and conversion to special guardianship when appropriate to do so.

## OPPORTUNITIES

15. The implementation of the revised fostering offer from September 2025 provides a significant opportunity to improve recruitment, retention and assessment performance by better recognising carers' skills and experience and aligning expectations, training and remuneration. The improved offer for carers introduced additional banding for carers, increased weekly fees, opportunities for an annual appreciation payment for foster carers subject to regular attendance at training and evidence of a positive year of fostering and an enhanced training package, including Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy training. The increased banding is aligned with the Local Authority's plan to recruit foster carers for those children and young people who have been identified as in appropriately currently living in residential care (due to lack of available foster placements or, in some cases, where more intensive support has been required

to allow step down into family-based care arrangements). This will address both financial and sufficiency pressures relating to residential care and ensure that children and young people are in the most suitable care arrangements to meet their individual needs .

16. The development of a dedicated Kinship Team presents an opportunity to improve support for kinship foster carers, giving carers the confidence to apply for special guardianship for the children in their care and to provide them with legal permanence. A full-time Kinship Support Worker has been recruited to the team, which will allow the opportunity for both planned and crisis support and strengthen placement stability. Additionally, the increased financial support offer for kinship carers, along with the opportunity to have ongoing support from a supervising social worker and access to regular training and support events has very much strengthened the offer for those carers.
17. Further refinement of targeted recruitment, including profiling of children and focused campaigns for step down from residential care, offers the potential to increase placement options for children and young people.

## **GOOD PRACTICE**

18. The service has demonstrated a strong culture of safeguarding and regulatory compliance. Foster care reviews have consistently met statutory requirements, and safer caring arrangements are embedded in supervision and review processes.
19. Despite significant pressure, assessments that have exceeded timescales have been subject to clear management oversight, with risks identified and mitigated appropriately.
20. The quality of assessment work remains a strength, with audits identifying good analysis, clear understanding of children's needs and positive relationships between social workers and carers.
21. The Mockingbird model continues to support assessment and post-approval stability by providing peer support, practical assistance and early intervention where placements or carers are under pressure. During this reporting period a 4th constellation has been launched and the scheme has been further expanded following the renewed fostering offer to develop a 5th constellation (not yet established).
22. Regular peer and formal support events have been held to promote retention of foster carers. During this reporting period foster carers and children have had the opportunity to attend a summer party, Christmas movie event, family training in respect of e-safety and foster carers own children have been supported through events during the summer and October school holiday. Additionally, the service facilitates monthly support groups for mainstream and kinship carers as well as a monthly therapeutic support group co-facilitated with CAMHS.
23. The first Foster Carer Conference was held in October 2025 with the theme of Trauma Informed Care. Over 90 foster carers attended the event, and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive.
24. The Family Placement Team facilitate quarterly Make a Match events with the independent fostering agencies, profiling children and young people both in foster care and residential care, who require long term placements. Feedback from the IFA's has

been very positive, noting that Stockton is the only local authority currently taking such an approach. To date long term foster placements have been identified for 2 children stepping down from residential and 1 child, who has significant disabilities, living with a short-term foster carer. Two potential matches are currently being explored from the December event.

25. Individual profiling of children is being progressed for those children and young people who need long term foster placements, when more traditional methods of family finding have been unsuccessful. Two children have been profiled to date; although no direct match was achieved, a significant increase in general enquiries for fostering was noted by the regional fostering hub. Work is now underway to identify those children in residential care who would benefit from step down and a targeted campaign will be progressed.

## **NEXT STEPS**

26. The following next steps have been identified:

### ***i. Placement Sufficiency***

Actions:

- Fully implement and embed the revised fostering offer (fees, banding, training and support)
- Continuing targeted recruitment activity, including profiling of children and step-down campaigns
- Joint recruitment initiatives with Foster with North East and Tees Valley partners
- Promote Fostering Friendly Employer accreditation and internal staff recruitment

### ***ii. Profiling of Children Needing Placements***

Actions:

- Maintain monthly profiling meetings to identify children with:
  - Placement searches exceeding 3 months
  - Children living in residential placements, who would benefit from family care
- Develop high-quality, strengths-based individual profiles for targeted use
- Social media and digital campaigns
- Use learning from previous profiling activity to refine messaging and targeting
- Track enquiries generated from profiling to evidence impact and inform future campaigns
- Prioritise profiling for children identified as suitable for step-down from residential care

### ***iii. Step-Down from Residential Care***

Actions:

- Identify children suitable for step-down
- Align targeted recruitment with the revised fostering offer to attract carers able to meet higher levels of need
- Use Make a Match events with IFAs and in-house carers to explore step-down options
- Strengthening joint planning between children's social workers and family placement staff
- Provide enhanced support packages, training and therapeutic input to carers stepping children down from residential care
- Monitor outcomes for children successfully stepping down to inform future practice

### ***iv. Assessment Capacity and Timeliness***

Actions:

- Embed newly recruited staff and stabilise workforce capacity
- Continue to encourage and monitor timely referrals for assessments
- Work closely with children's social workers in respect of viability assessments to identify situations where alternative legal arrangements are required and to ensure that prospective carers have the information to make informed decisions
- Maintain 6-weekly panel oversight of unregulated connected care arrangements
- Use learning from delays to improve assessment pathways

### ***v. Kinship Care and Permanency (SGOs)***

Actions:

- Fully embed the dedicated Kinship Team and Kinship Support Worker role
- Proactively support carers to consider SGOs where appropriate
- Develop robust SGO support plans and transition arrangements
- Increase staff confidence and applications to the ASGSF

### ***vi. Retention, Support and Placement Stability***

Actions:

- Maintain and expand foster and kinship carer support groups
- Continue therapeutic support groups in partnership with CAMHS
- Ensure every carer has an up-to-date support plan
- Use stability and disruption meetings proactively
- Continuing expansion of the Mockingbird model

**vii. *Training and Development***

Actions:

- Deliver a comprehensive, accessible training programme aligned to children's needs
- Make the Foster Carer Conference an annual event

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