

<b>Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee</b>
<b>30 June 2021</b>
<b>Children First Improvement – Fostering Initiative</b>
<b>Report by the Executive Director of Children, Young People and Learning</b>

<b>Summary</b>
<p>To assist the Committee in its role of scrutinising the progress to date and further proposals for improving the County Council's Fostering service, this report explains:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) The context for delivering the Fostering service in West Sussex, the aspirations of the service, changes in the level of demand for services and the various challenges faced (Section 1).</li><li>b) Phase 1 of the Fostering Initiative which raised the rate of allowance payments to foster parents with multiple children, giving the County Council a more competitive position in the fostering market (Section 2).</li><li>c) Phase 2 of the Initiative which proposes a more comprehensive review of the service (Section 3).</li><li>d) The financial arrangements (Section 4) and intended timescale for delivering the forthcoming Phase 2 improvements (Section 5).</li></ul> <p><b>The focus for Scrutiny</b></p> <p>The Scrutiny Committee is asked to consider the progress made on the Fostering service review and the further intended improvements, as set out in this report.</p> <p>Key areas for scrutiny include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a) Whether the provisions described in Phases 1 and 2 provide assurance that the objectives for achieving better outcomes for children through the planned Fostering service review will be met.</li><li>b) To consider what, if any, involvement Scrutiny would like to have in the development of the Phase 2 improvements.</li><li>c) To consider the role of the Scrutiny Committee in raising the profile of 'Children we care for' within the County Council and among its partners.</li></ul> <p>The Chairman will summarise the output of the debate for consideration by the Committee.</p>

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 This report sets out the update on the County Council's response to the current challenges regarding the recruitment and retention of foster carers in West Sussex, to ensure that our children can remain with our local families.
- 1.2 The vision for our Fostering Service is to offer our children and young people the best start in life, through ensuring that our children are placed with local families in our local communities. This will provide them with the best possible outcomes and will be at a reduced cost to the County Council. In line with this, the County Council aims to strengthen its market position and become the 'provider of choice' for current and future foster carers across West Sussex.
- 1.3 The increase in demand related to the children we care for (30% since 2018) coupled with a reduction in the number of our own in-house foster placements has led to an increased use of children being placed with Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) carers.
- 1.4 In the autumn of 2020, the County Council's Children's Social Care and Learning Directorate Leadership Team (DLT) mandated a full review of the Fostering service following the exponential increase in demand on that service over recent years. This demand is due in part to the significant increase of children we care for both locally and nationally. This demand has led to a significant increase in the use of Independent Foster Agency placements which often results in children being placed further from home and at a higher cost to the County Council.
- 1.5 Placing our children out of area can have a detrimental impact on their outcomes, and often has a negative impact on our children's education and maintaining children's family and friends' networks, which in turn has a negative impact on the potential for young people to return home. Being placed out of area can also impact on our ability to access support services for our children we place. Whilst we advocate for our children to receive these services, it can take longer and can prove challenging at times, particularly in relation to securing a school place or accessing Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
- 1.6 In order to deliver this we aim to create a high performing service that provides our children we care for with the best start in life and to provide our foster carers with the support that enables them to work more productively with us, delivering our aims together over two phases of implementation which will focus on three areas for improvement, to enhance our 'Fostering Offer', through:
  - The financial 'reward' offered to the County Council's in-house carers is increased to make it comparable with neighbouring local authorities and IFAs.
  - Service re-design to strengthen the level of support offered to carers and to manage high demand.
  - Co-production, engagement and relationship building with County Council foster carers and internal services.

## **2. Fostering Initiative Phase 1:**

- 2.1 On 1 April 2021, the first phase of the modifications, to increase allowance payments for foster carers caring for multiple children (Decision [OKD66 \(20/21\)](#)) was introduced, bringing the County Council in line with neighbouring local authorities and bringing parity to the amount paid for each of our children who are cared for.
- 2.2 Existing foster carers were informed of the new allowances in communications shared by our Assistant Director for Corporate Parenting, Daniel Ruaux on the 18 March 2021. Messaging around our new allowance payments has been shared in subsequent foster carer newsletters, and three online Q&A sessions were held in April, specifically to encourage our foster carers to explore caring for siblings or multiple children. These sessions were facilitated by a Fostering Recruitment team Practice Manager and Family Placement team Practice Manager.
- 2.3 In terms of attracting new foster carers to the service, messaging has been shared via our website, social media, press and promoted in a number of local magazines. The Fostering Recruitment team have also promoted the new allowances when individuals have enquired to foster. As well as general promotion of the need for more foster carers as part of our Foster Care Fortnight campaign, specific posts promoted our new payments per child and new Parent and Child allowance.
- 2.4 During Foster Care Fortnight in May 2021 there was a 71% increase (compared to the previous month) in unique visitors to our fostering website. With support from the communications team we generated 38 new leads via sign ups to the Fostering Recruitment team's new online information event on 25 May, of which 22 attended, generating 5 initial visits, 3 of which are transferring foster carers. This event was co-facilitated with a parent and child foster carer and foster carer who cares for more than one of our children. Due to the success of this another will take place in June and information will be captured for our keep in touch database.
- 2.5 At present we only have two months' data to evaluate, and we anticipate it will take several months before we are able to observe meaningful impact following the fee's uplift. However, there is early evidence of a positive impact in fostering enquiries, transferring foster carers, and we have observed an increase in the number of approved places per foster carer.
- 2.6 April to May 2020 compared with April to May 2021 shows the following:
  - Fostering enquiries have increased by 36%.
  - Fostering transfer requests have increased by 700%.
  - Number of placements approved per fostering household has increased by 80%.

## **3. Fostering Initiative Phase 2:**

- 3.1 The aim of this initiative is to carry out a deep dive / service review of the West Sussex County Council Fostering Service.

3.2 The Fostering team are responsible for:

- The recruitment, assessment, and support of all West Sussex foster carers (kinship and mainstream) and supported lodgings providers
- The assessment of private foster carers and applicants for special guardianship
- Placement matching (not including the commissioning of IFA and residential placements)

3.3 Wherever possible, we always try to find a suitable place for our children cared for within their wider family. Where this is not possible, we try to find a foster home that will meet the needs of the child, with local families, within our local community. Local demand has significantly increased across the Children, Young People and Learning service in West Sussex specifically children we care for numbers which have continued to rise since 2018, from circa 690 to 895 (as of June 2021), an increase of 30%. As at 31 March 2021, the County Council was supporting circa 332 carers (across kinship and mainstream). In the last financial year, the County Council made 252 mainstream placements and 11 parent and child placements in external provision due to being unable to meet this need using County Council foster carers.

3.4 The planned service review will provide an invaluable opportunity to highlight areas where service improvement is required, to increase in-house capacity and reduce reliance on higher cost IFA and residential placements, where these have not been identified as required to meet the needs of children and young people in our care. The review will be carried out between June 2021 and December 2021, using national research and evidence from the Fostering Network. The service review will be co-produced with current West Sussex foster carers with the analysis concluding with a series of options and recommendations to the County Council on the areas where service improvement can be made to enhance West Sussex's offer to our fostering family and therefore reverse the decrease in our in-house foster care capacity, and will cover:

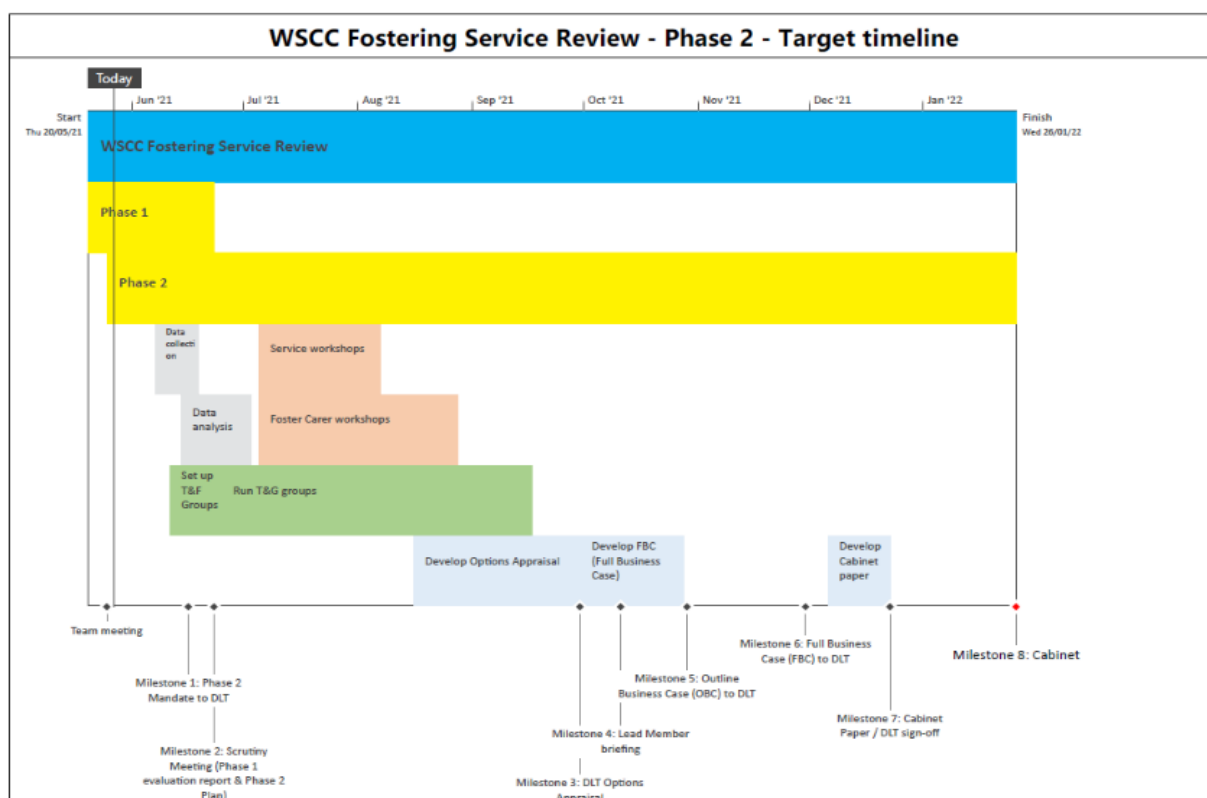
- Recruitment, retention, and reward
- Support, training & culture
- Process, technology, and customer experiences/outcomes
- Marketing
- Financial and Staff Implications

## **4. Resources**

4.1 The programme to deliver Phases 1 & 2 of the Fostering review is supported by a permanent increase to the budget of £1.3m from 2021/22, with the new fees having gone live from 1 April 2021. Phase 1 has cost approx. £650k, leaving £650k for Phase 2. As indicated in this report, the avoidance of higher cost placements will allow the service to achieve better economy and efficiency, thereby offsetting some of the impacts of increasing demand.

## 5. Anticipated Timeline/milestones

5.1 The following table sets out the expected delivery dates in Phase 2:



## 6. Risk Implications and Mitigations

Risk	Mitigating Action (in place or planned)
Inability to meet demand for appropriate foster care placements within the local community	The provisions described in this report, including achieving a more competitive position in the fostering market, are intended to address future demand. It is intended that more County Council foster carers will be recruited, and the impact of the changes will be closely monitored.
Failure to manage escalating costs of fostering in West Sussex	As above, the provisions set out in this report are intended to grow the in-house capacity and reduce reliance on more expensive solutions.

## 7. Other Options Considered

7.1 Given the context of escalating demand and the difficulty of managing costs without increasing the numbers of in-house providers, the arrangements set out in this report and summarised at 3.4 are considered to be the only satisfactory approach to creating a service that will meet current and future needs and raise the profile of fostering generally.

## **8. Equality Duty**

- 8.1 The service recognises the primary importance of child safeguarding, sound family relationships, good parenting, and the nurture of children to fulfil their potential, including through fostering. The provision of the service is based on need, as determined through formal assessment protocols. This need is not explicitly related to formally protected characteristics, but any such characteristic is and will continue (as now) to be respected in compliance with equality principles and taken into account in the way in which the service is delivered.
- 8.2 In terms of those with a protected characteristic, the service will ensure enablement and support across all relevant categories, and this will both continue and be enhanced through the Children First agenda.

## **9. Social Value**

- 9.1 The Children First agenda and measures for improving the Fostering service discussed in this report will directly support improved delivery of the West Sussex Plan priority to give every child the Best Start in Life. Enhancing the protection of young lives and support for family life will continue to build resilience and social capital and contribute towards stronger and more effective communities. The implementation of the service improvements will also respect sustainability principles in accordance with the County Council's strategic policies.

## **10. Crime and Disorder Implications**

- 10.1 There are positive implications for Sections 17, 37 and 39 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 in the prevention and reduction of crime and anti-social behaviour, and in reducing offending and re-offending by young people, all of which are affected by the measures towards improving arrangements for foster care outlined in this report.

## **11. Human Rights Implications**

- 11.1 The County Council has an overriding duty to safeguard the Human Rights of children in need, and this has been recognised in the Children First agenda. The County Council is mindful of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights – The Right to Respect for Family and Private Life - and has taken relevant factors into consideration in preparing this report. The processing of personal and special category data is subject to the County Council's Data Protection Act policies and procedures in relation to discharging the County Council's and its partners' legal responsibilities.
- 11.2 The County Council is also mindful of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child - which states that all children have the right to be consulted and to have their opinions heard on any decision that affects them. Hearing, understanding, and acting upon the voice and experiences of the child is a key design principle of the Children First service improvements, and in the measures proposed for adoption in the Fostering Service.

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**Background Papers** – None