

London Borough of Enfield

Children, Young People & Education Scrutiny Panel – 10th January 2023

Subject: Recruitment & Retention of Foster Carers Report

Cabinet Member: Cllr Abdul Abdullahi

Executive Director: Tony Theodoulou

Purpose of Report

1. This report updates the Scrutiny Panel on the work of the Fostering Service relating to the recruitment and retention of foster carers, which was highlighted as a priority for the Cabinet Member.

Relevance to the Council Plan

2. Enfield Council's foster carers provide stability, care and family support to children and young people who are not able to live with their birth family. This is often a temporary arrangement whilst work is being undertaken to return the children to their families but can also be a long-term arrangement if it is decided that it is not safe for children to return to the care of their birth parents. Our pool of foster carers will be the Looked after Child's alternative family for as long as that care is needed. With the help and support of their family and friends in their support network, they can make a positive difference to the children in their care and prepare them for the future.

Background

3. The Fostering Service is staffed with experienced practitioners and managers. The areas of specialism within the service are 2-fold: the recruitment and assessment of foster carers; and the support and development of foster carers once they have been approved as suitable to foster.

All approved foster carers have a named supervising social worker who provides them with regular supervision, monitors the quality of care they deliver and supports their professional development. A comprehensive and flexible training and development programme is available for all carers.

Enfield is a part of the North London Fostering & Permanence Consortium (NLFPC) made up of Enfield, Barnet, Camden, Hackney, Haringey and Islington. The boroughs work together, sharing training, recruitment activities and fostering placements for children across the six boroughs. Shared planning and funding have allowed the consortium boroughs to deliver more cost effective and innovative services to foster carers and special guardians.

Main Considerations for the Panel

4. The fostering recruitment and assessment team continually look at ways in which to attract new foster carers for Enfield's Looked After Children. This has been challenging throughout the pandemic and the current economic climate due to the national cost of living crises. This has resulted in potential foster carers feeling that having an extra child in the family home would lead to added costs on their household bills resulting in people not wanting to apply to become foster carers whereas they may have considered it in the past. This has impacted heavily on local authorities and independent fostering agencies nationally, in their efforts to recruit new foster carers. Retention of foster carers is also proving a challenge as they struggle to 'make ends meet' with rising fuel costs and food bills. In light of this, the service is looking at ways in which to address this using innovative ideas and 'invest to save' schemes to recruit new foster carers and retain the existing ones.

4.1 Costs

The average cost of an in-house foster placement is £450 per week and the average cost of an IFA placement is £900. The extra cost of one child in an IFA per year is £23,400. As the national demand for foster carers increases, even with IFAs, the lack of the local authority's own in-house carers can lead to children being placed in residential placements, usually out of the borough, at an average cost of £5000 per week.

An IFA placement or a residential placement being out of the borough has other indirect costs attached, such as:

- Transport costs to and from the child's school (which will in most circumstances be in Enfield).
- Costs and time of social workers and IROs to conduct LAC visits and LAC Reviews.

It is evident that greater social work can be undertaken when a child is placed with in-house carers; the chances of them returning home or to a family and friends' carer is much higher which avoids the need for on-going care costs for a child.

4.2 Comparison Foster Carer Enquiries and Approval Stats

The table below gives an overview of the comparison figures amongst the NCL boroughs during the year 2021-22.

	Barnet	Camden	Enfield	Hackney	Haringey	Islington
Number of FC Enquiries	108	163	236	234	56	284
Number of	11	6	17	14	12	5

FC Approvals						
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It is positive to note that Enfield has the highest number of foster carer approvals during this year.

During the current year from 1st April to 30th November 2022 (to date), the table below shows the figures so far for foster carer enquiries and approvals amongst the consortium boroughs.

	Barnet	Camden	Enfield	Hackney	Haringey	Islington
Number of FC Enquiries	110	194	162	94	39	No stats received
Number of FC Approvals	4	1	7	7	6	a/a

Currently we have 8 fostering households still in assessment so it is anticipated that by the end of this financial year (as at 31/03/23), we will have approved 15 new foster carers (subject to the Agency Decision Maker's approval).

4.3 Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers

4.4 Fostering Allowances

Research was undertaken to look at whether Enfield can be more attractive to recruit, assess and approve more foster carers. First and foremost, I looked at our foster carers allowances and noted that the fostering rate for children in the 0-10 age band was lower than the DfE recommended minimum rate and lower than the NCL boroughs. (See table below, figures are per week).

Age Band	Camden	Enfield	Hackney	Haringey	Islington
0-4 years	£380	£325.29	£409	£377	£379
5-10 years	£380	£325.29	£412	£377	£379

A proposal has been put forward to increase the Enfield allowances for children in the 0-10 age band to £375 (calculated as an average of the NCL boroughs). By doing this, it is anticipated that our offer to recruit more foster carers and to retain our current pool of carers will become more attractive.

Enfield's fostering allowances in the 11-17 age bands are comparable with the NCL boroughs and are even slightly higher than in two of the NCL boroughs. Therefore, these do not need adjusting.

4.5 **Birthday, Festival and Holiday Allowances**

The table below is what Enfield is paying their foster carers compared to the NCL boroughs for birthday, festival, and holiday allowances (per year).

	Barnet	Camden	Enfield	Hackney	Haringey	Islington
Birthday	£176	£207	£77	£100	£232	£186
Festival	£176	£207	£77	£100	£232	£186
Holiday	£226	£414	£244	£450	£874	£350

From the table above, it is clearly evident that Enfield's birthday, festival and holiday allowances are much lower than most of the NCL boroughs and it is felt that this is a contributing factor to retaining foster carers and attracting new foster carers. Therefore, a proposal has been put forward for Enfield's birthday and festival allowances to be increased to £150 per year and for the holiday allowance to be increased to £450 per year. Again, it is anticipated that this will improve the potential to recruit new foster carers and will help to retain existing foster carers.

4.6 **Retention Package**

Following a benchmarking exercise with our NCL boroughs, a proposal has been put forward as part of a retention package to our foster carers, so that our carers feel valued and remain as carers with Enfield. The plan is to offer annual retention payments to foster carers based on the number of years they have fostered for Enfield, as follows.

Foster carers approved for:

- 2 years will receive £300
- 5 years will receive £600
- 10 years will receive £1,500
- 20 years will receive £2,500

If agreed, this retention package will commence in the new financial year (1st April 2023).

4.7 **Energy Fuel Payment**

It has been acknowledged that the gas and electricity fuel crisis has impacted on everyone, including our foster carers, many of whom are struggling to manage as they continue to care for our Looked After Children. Recently, it was agreed that a one-off fuel payment of £300 should be paid to our foster carers which they will receive by the end of December 2022. This payment will also be offered to foster carers newly approved until the end of this financial year. NCL boroughs are making similar payments to their foster carers also.

4.8 **Invest to Save Initiatives**

4.9 As part of our recruitment and retention plans, I and the fostering team have identified a number of initiatives that we are progressing to attract new foster carers as well as retain existing foster carers. 4.3 and 4.4 above relate to a review of allowances and this is in the process of being agreed.

4.10 **Additional Bedroom Grant**

4.11 We are offering foster carers the opportunity to apply to have additional bedroom builds through loft conversions or extensions to so that additional placements can be provided to our Looked After Children. This is being fully funded by the Council's Capital Funds Programme which will span over a 9-year rolling period. A criterion for accepting applications from foster carers has been agreed which is included in the Policy for this scheme. Ultimately, the aim is to provide more in-house placement for our children, but this scheme will also benefit foster carers as their properties will increase in value.

4.12 **Foster Carer Ambassadors**

We have now identified a group of existing foster carers willing to be involved in recruitment events to attract new carers. The role of these ambassadors is to talk directly to people showing an interest in fostering such as the process, what to expect when being assessed, the role of fostering panel, and support offered to carers once they are approved.

4.13 **Buses and Billboard Adverts**

4.14 We are in the process of obtaining quotes to advertise and promote Enfield's fostering service on buses and billboards in the borough. We will be choosing a bus route that drives through many of the routes in the borough although we do acknowledge that there will be some cross over into neighbouring boroughs.

4.15 **'Buddying' Scheme**

It has been acknowledged that some newly approved foster carers are (understandably) anxious at the prospect of having their first placement following their approval. Therefore, a scheme has been developed to pair new foster cares with experienced foster carers who can support them in their first year of fostering and beyond if necessary. This support is in addition to that provided by the carers' fostering social workers.

4.16 **'Golden Hello' Initiative**

4.17 This initiative is aimed at foster carers already approved with an agency but are considering a move to Enfield. It has been acknowledged that as

such carers will need to be re-approved by Enfield, they should receive a fee of £1000 for their commitment to being re-assessed and upon their first placement of a child. Flyers are currently in the process of being printed for distribution.

4.18 Staff Referral Scheme

4.19 To encourage Enfield's employees to support our efforts, we are launching a new scheme for Enfield staff to receive a bonus connected to referring friends, family, colleagues or business associates to Enfield's fostering team to be recruited as foster carers. We are offering £500 to the Enfield Council employee who refers a potential foster carer to us, upon the person becoming approved as a foster carer and accepting their first placement. We are promoting this via Staff Matters and the Children's Service Centre of Excellence newsletters.

4.20 STAR Parties

4.21 Existing foster carers have been approached to host Start Thinking About Recruitment (STAR) parties in their homes for people in their network or their friends' networks that may be interested in fostering. Research has shown that the best way to recruit foster carers is through 'word of mouth' and recommendation by foster carers already approved. Foster carers have volunteered to host such parties which will commence in the New Year when the busy festivity period is over.

4.22 Valuing Foster Carers

4.23 From talking to our foster carers, it is evident that they do not always feel valued in their roles as foster carers which is a national issue amongst foster carers and not unique to Enfield. Having considered this, I and the HoS for our LAC Service attended a foster carers support group recently whereby we listened to carers, responded to questions, and gave them the opportunity to come up with ideas as to how the department can make improvements. Feedback following our attendance to this group revealed that our carers found this to be very useful and felt it was a constructive way in which to communicate their needs to senior management. As a result of this, it has been agreed that I and the HoS will attend these groups on a regular basis moving forward.

4.24 Recently we held a festive event for our foster carers whereby we invited relevant professionals, Councillors, and senior management including directors. Foster carers felt valued and were happy to be connecting with each other again following the pandemic and lockdown restrictions. Carers who had fostered for Enfield for more than 10 years were also presented with a long-service award certificate and gift voucher.

4.25 **Foster Carers Experiences of Navigating Systems to Become Foster Carers**

4.26 Foster carers can use a variety of ways in which to express interest in becoming foster carers:

- The Council's Website and our own bespoke Fostering Website, both have links giving straightforward access to information and a user-friendly application process.
- On-line portal system which can be accessed via the above websites.
- We offer a daily telephone duty system so carers can call and speak personally to a team member about fostering and complete an expression of interest application should they feel ready to proceed.
- Foster carers can email us and expect to receive a response on the same day or the day after.
- We hold monthly information sessions which provides potential carers with an overview of what fostering entails and gives them an opportunity to ask any questions to help them make very important decisions.
- We have regular campaigns and events promoting fostering in Enfield which raises awareness and interest from people considering a career in fostering. Experienced staff are available to respond to enquiries following these.

4.27 **Feedback from Foster Carers on their Experiences of Becoming FCs**

4.28 As part of our Audit Moderation Programme, we include feedback from foster carers on their experiences of becoming foster carers. Comments from foster carers include the following:

- Applicants generally found our recruitment process straightforward, uncomplicated, and easy to follow. Some were surprised at how quick the process was from initial enquiry to initial visit.
- They stated that the team had made the process easier for them and that any queries they had were answered and encouraged their desire to become foster carers.
- They felt they had learnt a lot through the process and found it a positive experience. Some said they enjoyed going through the assessment and that they were starting the role with knowledge and tools that they gained during the assessment process.

- Applicants felt the preparation training was enjoyable, enlightening and helped to develop their understanding of fostering and provided more insight about what the role entails.
- Some applicants felt the process was at times intrusive and time consuming, with some lengthy sessions, however, they understood why the assessment had to be in-depth, and most felt the level of detail was appropriate.
- Applicants said they developed positive working relationships with their assessing social workers and found that the assessors explained the process to them clearly and the requirements of the role. Most found the assessor was sensitive to their experiences and needs.
- Following the training and the assessment, applicants said they felt ready and prepared to face the challenge of caring for a child.

4.29 It is pleasing to note that the majority of our foster carers remain with Enfield for a long period of time. We have in the region of 30+ foster carers who have been fostering for more than 10 years and some that have fostered for more than 20 years. Inevitably, we will always have foster carers that feel they can no longer continue in their roles, but this is not unique to Enfield, this is a national occurrence across all fostering agencies.

4.30 **Resignation and De-registration of Foster Carers**

As I have indicated above, it is not unusual to have foster carers being de-registered due to them resigning or the department deciding that they are no longer suitable to foster. Unfortunately, despite efforts to retain and approve new foster carers, the number of carers de-registered usually matches the number of new carers approved. Therefore, the number of approved foster carers in each financial year tends to be static. Having said this, reasons for de-registrations vary and with foster carers who go on to adopt or become SG carers for the children placed with them, this should not be viewed as a deficit as their roles as foster carers have changed to provide better outcomes for our children. Equally, children placed with foster carers who remain with them until adulthood convert to 'staying put' carers and are de-registered as foster carers due to this. In this financial year to date (as at 30/11/22), we have had 12 foster carers being de-registered for various reasons, as follows:

- 1 x carers resigned due to change in their family circumstances as a result of their birth daughter's sudden escalating behaviour issues.
- 1 x carer resigned due to her declining health and finding the last placement challenging as a result of this.
- 1 x carer resigned due to significant change in family circumstances i.e. adult daughter and 4 grand-children moving into the home.

- 2 x carer(s) resigned due to moving out of London.
- 1 x carer(s) resigned due to significant change in family circumstances i.e. their father becoming very unwell and needing to prioritise elderly parents.
- 1 x carer resigned as the young person placed with her as a family and friends' placement had moved to semi-independence living and was no longer a Looked After Child.
- 2 x carer(s) resigned as they obtained SGOs on the children placed with them and they became Special Guardians in place of Foster Carers. This is very positive as the children (6 in total) are no longer in the care system.
- 1 x carer retired.
- 1 x carer(s) were de-registered as family and friends foster carers by the department due to allegations from one of the children placed that she and her siblings were being mistreated. This de-registration was not challenged by these carers as they had stated their intention to resign had we not taken action to safeguard the children.
- 1 x carer(s) resigned due to very specific placement preferences which could not be met by the department. Carers were also constantly disgruntled despite efforts by the team to appease them.

I am anticipating that we will have 3-4 more de-registrations by the end of the financial year as carers have informed their social workers that changes in their family circumstances have resulted in their ability to offer future placements to our Looked After Children. However, I am confident that now we have good proposals in place to retain carers, we will have fewer foster carers indicating their intentions to leave Enfield to go to IFAs who, on the whole, offer better incentives. Making foster carers feel more valued is the key to retention in my view.

5. **Conclusions**

The recruitment and retention of foster carers is a national crisis impacting on fostering agencies nationwide. This has been mainly due to the cost-of-living crisis where potential foster carers feel that having an extra child in the family home would lead to added costs to their household bills, resulting in people not wanting to apply to become foster carers.

- 5.1 The requests for placements for our Looked After Children is ongoing and whilst this crisis continues, we are having to look at creative ways in which to recruit in a very competitive market to keep up with demand.

- 5.2 We also need to consider that whilst we strive to recruit new foster carers, we have existing foster carers who are de-registered for various reasons, such as, retirement, a change in their family circumstances impacting on their ability to continue with fostering, carers whom we feel are no longer suitable to foster due to standard of care issues, and children becoming adults wishing to remain with their carers via 'staying put' arrangements.
- 5.3 Despite the challenges we face as a service, the benchmarking exercise that I have undertaken has evidenced that we compare well with our NCL boroughs. I anticipate that the finance review, together with the initiatives I have outlined above, will improve the prospect of recruiting more new carers and help to retain our existing carers.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Marketing and Recruitment Strategy 2022-23

Background Papers

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-market-study-final-report/final-report> (Recommendation 1.3)