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To: The Chair and Members of the Children's Scrutiny Committee

County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter
Devon
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Date: 1 November 2024

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CHILDREN'S SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday, 11th November, 2024

A meeting of the Children's Scrutiny Committee is to be held on the above date at 10.30 am at Committee Suite, County Hall, Exeter to consider the following matters.

Donna Manson
Chief Executive

SUPPLEMENT

13 Fostering Task Group (Pages 1 - 20)

Task Group report attached.

Children's Scrutiny Committee

Fostering Task Group

November 2024

Agenda Item 13

1. Recommendations

1.1 The Task Group asks the Children's Scrutiny Committee to endorse the Report and recommendations below and commend the Report and recommendations to the Cabinet.

1.2 The Task Group requests Cabinet acts against the following recommendations and that an update on the progress is brought back to the Children's Scrutiny Committee at its March 2025 Committee meeting.

Recommendation
To support the recruitment, retention and lived experienced of foster carers
1. That the foster carer allowance and fees review separately recognises foster carer's skills, experience and to reward them for their time.
2. The Council to work with Devon's District and City Council partners to explore a reduction/ exemption/ or discount to Council Tax and access to leisure facilities for Fostering households.
3. The Council continues to commit to the Mockingbird programme and funds additional constellations in the 2025/26 Budget.
4. The Council shows it values the work of foster carers and re-instates an annual celebration event thanking foster carers for their service.
5. To improve the Council's current offer to foster carers: a) Ensuring access to a laptop or tablet as part of the offer, to support and enable foster carers to carry out their role effectively, and efficiently. b) The Council makes improvements to address the current challenges posed to foster carers by the use of Egress or gives foster carers access to a corporate email address. c) As part of the Council's digital offer, develop or procure a 'Foster Carer portal' system d) The Council explores improvements to the payments and expenses process with a longer term view to develop or procure a digital solution for foster carers expenses and payments.
To ensure staff across the Fostering service feel valued and to support recruitment and retention of staff.
6. Explore improvements in working practices within the fostering service to allow social workers to spend time working with families and young people.
7. Review the terms, conditions and package available to permanent staff to ensure equitable salaries, benefits and retention payments.
8. Review the equity of the policy of paying the £90 per annum Social Work England registration fee to some social workers and not others with the view implementing a fair policy to all social workers.
To support improved practice in the Fostering Service
9. The Council ensures the widespread and best use of the range of resources connected to Coram Baaf.
10. The Council commits the necessary resources to ensure that the 'Snapshot' (a tool used to manage foster carer allocations and vacancies) is up to date, regularly reviewed and used effectively.

2. Background and Scope

- 2.1 At the 2023/24 Scrutiny Work Programme Masterclass the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Schools, Councillor Andrew Leadbetter, invited Members (Councillors) to consider holding a Masterclass on the Fostering Service and Mockingbird programme to improve Member's knowledge on the service.
- 2.2 The Masterclass was held on Monday 8th January 2024; in attendance were the Head of Service and Deputy Director, Head of Children's Health and Wellbeing. Members discussed the Council's plans to improve the recruitment and retention of in house foster carers, and therefore increase the number of in house foster carers. The Masterclass also addressed the differences in the costs of in-house foster care compared to independent fostering agencies (IFAs).
- 2.3 At the subsequent Children's Scrutiny Committee Budget meeting on 18th January 2024, Members welcomed the Council's proposed £2.2m investment in the internal and external Fostering budget and raised concerns about the cost differential between in house and agency foster carers. Members were told that the Council planned to expand in house fostering capacity by recruiting and retaining more in house foster carers as part of the Council's key priorities for the service, which would also support the priority to increase the appropriate provision of accommodation for children and young people in Devon.
- 2.4 The Corporate Parenting Forum meeting in February 2024 included an update from officers on foster carer sufficiency, and reported on efforts to support recruitment, retention and the Fostering Devon Campaign.
- 2.5 After the subject had been raised a number of times in different forums, Members considered how to support the Council's plans through an investigative piece of work and resolved at the Children's Scrutiny Committee meeting in March 2024 to begin a Task Group looking at Fostering and foster carers.
- 2.6 The initial meeting of the Task Group, which involved Members of the Task Group, the Cabinet Member and key officers from the service, agreed the scope as follows:
1. To understand the different offer(s) available to foster carers and to compare the difference between in house foster carers and independent fostering agency offers.
 2. To seek best practice from other Local Authorities on their offer and how they recruit and retain foster carers.
 3. To consider how the Council could recruit and retain more in house foster carers.
 4. To understand the lived experience of children, young people and foster carers in Devon more.
- 2.7 Through the summer (July-September 2024), the Task Group met with staff, foster carers, independent fostering agencies and other local authorities in dedicated witness sessions. The Task Group also received 7 written submissions. The details of the evidence gathering is included in section 8 of the report.

Agenda Item 13

3. What is Fostering?

- 3.1 Fostering is when an adult or family looks after a child, young person or sibling group, in their own home in situations where their own family is unable to look after them (Fostering Devon, 2024). There are many different reasons for this including bereavement, illness, family breakdown, substance abuse, domestic abuse or needing a safe place to stay.
- 3.2 Some children will stay with a foster family for a short period of time of a few days, while other children will live with their foster families on a longer-term basis. Adults who foster, are known as foster parents or foster carers.
- 3.3 The local authority retains legal responsibility for the child or young person in foster care. This is distinguished from adoption, a permanent placement of a child or young person, where adoptive parents become the child's legal parents and take on legal responsibility for the child or young person.
- 3.4 Fostering can be either delivered in house through a cohort of foster carers who are directly supported by the Council or commissioned to IFAs, who have their own cohort of foster carers and support networks.
- 3.5 The legal duties of the Council in relation to Children in Need, Children in Care and Care Experienced young people are contained within the Children Act 1989, this includes the Sufficiency Duty which requires the Council to, as far as reasonably practicable, ensure that there is sufficient accommodation to meet the needs of those children the Council has a Corporate Parenting responsibility for. Fostering is one of five areas of focus within the sufficiency strategy.
- 3.6 Foster care is a valued option to allow children and young people to live in a safe, supportive and stable home; it also supports children and young people to step across from residential care as part of their permanence plans; and for some, support a return to Devon from out of county placements, which can be a distance from their local communities. It is recognised that a child or young person's placements should be based on meeting their needs.

National (England) Context

- 3.7 The most recent Department for Education (DfE) statistics, reporting in November 2023, showed that at 31st March 2023, there were 83,840 children and young people looked after in England. Of these, 57,020 were in Fostering Placements, representing 68% of looked after children, and 43,405 Fostering Households (Department for Education, 2023).
- 3.8 Since 2019, the number of in-house local authority households has fallen from 22,365 to 19,835 in 2023, making up 46% of households - a fall of 11%. Whilst the number of IFA households remained similar (c. 15,000). Due to fall in local authority households, IFA households as a percentage of the households has risen from 40% to 43% (Ofsted, 2023).
- 3.9 There has been a downward trend in the number of applications and newly approved households for mainstream fostering since 2019 (Ofsted, 2023).
- 3.10 In the South West, the number of mainstream fostering households fell by 6% in 2022 – 2023, whilst the number of IFA fostering households grew by 9% (Ofsted, 2023).
- 3.11 In 2022, [Ofsted reported](#) on the challenges local authorities had in meeting their sufficiency duty, this included issues with recruitment and retention of foster carers. Challenges included: an ageing population of foster carers, older foster carers who may

not be able care for a child or young person in the long term because of retirement or other age-related reasons, and the foster care allowances not keeping rising at the same rate as the cost of living (Ofsted, 2022).

3.12 An Independent Foster Carers Survey, carried out in 2024, by [FosterWiki](#) received 2,500 responses. The survey covers a range of issues from training, support, concerns about allegations against foster carers, and working with other services. Some key responses included:

- 75% of respondents considered resigning as a foster carer because they felt undervalued, 61% because of burnout/exhaustion or lack of breaks.
- 78% of foster carers reported that their mental health had suffered because of their fostering role.
- 75% of foster carers would not recommend fostering to a friend, family member or colleague (FosterWiki, 2024).

3.13 Similarly, the Fostering Network reported on the falling numbers of local authority foster carers and found 3 key themes as to why foster carers were leaving the sector included:

- Receiving sufficient support from fostering services,
- Feeling valued and respected by fostering services and social workers,
- The adequacy of financial support and administration (The Fostering Network, 2023).

Fostering in Devon

3.14 As of June 2024, Devon County Council had 564 children placed in foster care, of which 66% (370 children) were placed in in house foster care and 33% (186 children) with an IFA. This mirrors the national average of around two thirds of children in local authority fostering and one third placed IFA placements (Ofsted, 2023).

3.15 As per the 2024/2025 Budget (Devon County Council, 2024), the Council's Budget for the Fostering Service and Fostering Placements is made up of:

- £5.384 million for the Fostering Team,
- £10.259 million for Independent Fostering Placements, and;
- £11.854 million for Internal Fostering Placements.

3.16 This totals to an overall budget of £27.497 million, a rise of £2.750 million from 2023/24.

3.17 Reducing the overall numbers of children looked after, ensuring that children are in the right placement with the right support and recruiting and retaining high quality foster carers is a strategic and financial priority for Children's Services in Devon (Devon County Council, 2024)

3.18 The Council's 2024/25 Budget made a strategic decision to seek to find savings by reducing the number of external/independent fostering placements from 163 to 147 and increase the number of in-house/internal fostering placements from 386 to 431. This was part of a drive to improve in house places by investing an additional £122,000 on the Mockingbird programme and recruiting and retaining more in house foster carers to create a saving of £632,000 (Devon County Council, 2024).

3.19 The Council recognises the importance of Fostering, both to improve the effectiveness of its social work intervention and provide a long term, loving home for Devon's children and young people, but also the financial benefits compared to residential care.

Agenda Item 13

- 3.20 Like many local authorities, the Council is challenged in recruiting and retaining foster carers. Whilst there has been an 18% rise in the number of Children in Care in Devon in the last 3 years, there has been no net gain of in-house foster carers (Devon County Council, 2024).
- 3.21 In addition, the Council's current foster carer demographic is aging, with 45% foster carers aged 50 years+ and a further 36% aged 61years+ (Devon County Council, 2024). It is possible that those foster carers will retire or reduce their workload which has the potential to impact on sufficiency; the Council needs to recruit additional foster carers to ensure sufficiency

4. Key issues

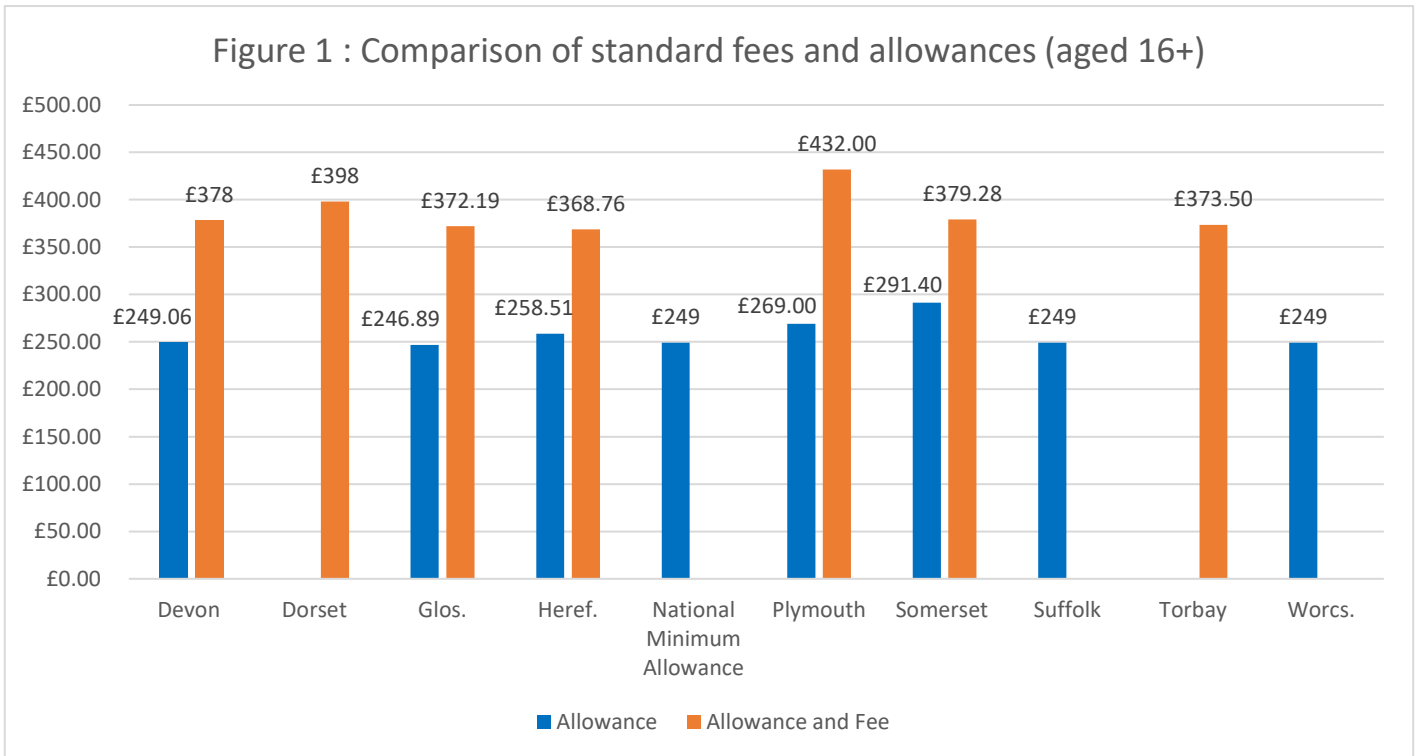
- 4.1 As part of its evidence gathering and witness interview sessions, the Task Group heard a range of key issues that form this Report.
- 4.2 Reflecting on what Members heard, the key theme arising was **value**; both carers and staff whom the Task Group met with expressed not feeling valued by the Council. In an increasingly challenging landscape to recruit and retain foster carers, this was particularly concerning to Members.
- 4.3 The Report's key issues and recommendations are separated into 4 areas: the recruitment of foster carers, the retention of foster carers, the recruitment and retention of Social Workers and continued improvements to practice. These areas are important in helping the Council to achieve its strategic aim to recruit and retain more foster carers
- 4.4 Members of the Task Group were aware that throughout the duration of the Task Group the Council was continuing to work to improve services and Devon's offer for foster carers.

Recruitment of Foster Carers

Devon County Council's offer to Foster Carers

- 4.5 A key part of the Task Group's scope was to understand the different offer(s) available to foster carers, either as in house foster carers or IFAs and seeking to understand best practice.
- 4.6 In April 2024, Cabinet agreed an uplift to the standard fostering allowances and fees in response to the Department of Education's rise in the National Minimum Allowances (NMA) for fostering allowances. As part of that report, the Council made a commitment to re-structure the fostering allowances in the financial year 2024/25, highlighting that Devon's current offer was not competitive enough to attract and retain foster carers when compared to other local authorities and IFAs.
- 4.7 It is difficult to draw a direct comparison of Devon's financial offer to foster carers, against other local authorities (geographical or statistical neighbours) as each local authority structures their allowances and rates differently depending on needs, ages, additional allowances such as training and celebration events. Some local authorities show separate allowances (to cover the expenses of looking after a child or young person) and fee/rates (to the foster carer), whilst some are combined payments. A further example of a comparison can be found on page 3 in the April 2024 Cabinet Report, [Increases to the Fostering Allowances 2023 – 2024 and 2024 – 2025](#).

4.8 Figure 1 compares the standard fees and allowances for a foster carer looking after 1 young person aged 16 years and above. It shows that Devon’s fees and allowances are similar to other local statistical and demographic neighbours. Devon pays 6p a week above the national minimum allowance (£249.06 compared to £249). The Council’s fee element is similar to other local authorities although based on attendance at training and support groups (12 per year) rather than a fee paid to the foster carer to recognise their time and skills to foster.



4.9 IFAs offer around £350-450 per week per child/young person, however, the Council is charged at c.£1000 per week, with the remaining money used by IFAs for central costs, and an element of profit. It is difficult to make a direct comparison between the IFAs offer and that of local authorities: allowances and fees rates do not show a total cost to the local authority e.g. the total cost of the placement including social work/fostering staff, central costs and management costs. Furthermore, the presentation of allowances is different for local authority and IFA. For example, Devon County Council provides a holiday and festival allowance on top of the standard fees and allowances, whereas some other local authorities and IFAs include this in their weekly sum.

4.10 When discussing the financial offer with foster carers and staff, it was highlighted that it was “quite competitive” and a similar offer. Members of the Task Group discussed and considered whether increasing fees paid to foster carers by the Council would improve recruitment and retention.

4.11 Although the Council’s offer was considered “quite competitive”, it was acknowledged from witnesses that the sector itself was increasingly competitive with other local authorities and IFAs actively recruiting foster carers; therefore Devon’s offer needs to remain competitive.

4.12 Witnesses reported that the overall structure of the Council’s fees and allowances differed to other local authorities. Other local authorities allowances reflect the foster

Agenda Item 13

carer's time and skills, whereas Devon's fees are dependent on attendance at training and support events.

- 4.13 In addition, witnesses reported that other local authorities also paid retainers fees for carers e.g. for Child and Parent Assessment Team (CPAT) carers which Devon currently does not offer.
- 4.14 Members of the Task Group were aware that the Fostering Service are reviewing their fees and allowances, with a view of taking a report to Cabinet in the future.
- **Recommendation 1:** That the foster carer allowance and fees review separately recognises foster carer's skills, experience and to reward them for their time.
- 4.15 There are other examples from local authorities and other organisations who have a wider offer for their foster carers. Witnesses highlighted that a number of Councils offer exemptions or reductions on their Council Tax for foster carer households and some provide passes for discounted use of leisure facilities in the Council. Examples of local authorities offering a Council Tax reduction or exemption scheme included [Somerset](#) (50%), [Herefordshire](#) (50%) and [Thurrock](#) (100%); it should be noted that Somerset and Thurrock are Unitary authorities.
- 4.16 The Council, in partnership with Devon's District and City Council partners has agreed to Council Tax exemptions for Care Leavers, and the Task Group asks that this is expanded to foster carer households to improve the competitiveness of Devon's offer.
- **Recommendation 2:** The Council to work with Devon's District and City Council partners to explore a reduction/ exemption/ or discount to Council Tax and access to leisure facilities for Fostering households.

Marketing and promotion

- 4.17 As part of the recruitment of foster carers and the promotion of Devon's offer to potential foster carers, the Task Group were informed about best practice and initiatives to market and promote the Council's offer to attract new foster carers.
- 4.18 Witnesses told the Task Group that overall, there was a need for an improved promotion and packaging of the Council's offer (including specifying what is included in fees and allowances, and what the Council provides in addition to this) but acknowledged that there was work internally to improve the Council's marketing.
- 4.19 The Task Group were informed that the Council is working with a marketing agency to improve its marketing materials, with a budget of £30,000, supported by dedicated staffing. In comparison, the Task Group were told Suffolk County Council's Budget was £26,000 and Somerset Council's budget was £100,000.
- 4.20 The Council uses different methods to promote the service and being a foster carer. This includes a website (www.fosteringdevon.org.uk), social media platforms and community events. Recent improvements have increased the promotion of the website when searched online. The images below shows that on 11th October 2024, the Council's websites were the first Google results when searching "devon fostering" (Figure 2). In fact, the Council had the 4 out of the top 5 results. Although on Microsoft Bing (Figure 3), the Council was not in the top 2 – it did hold the 3rd, 4th and 5th highest result.

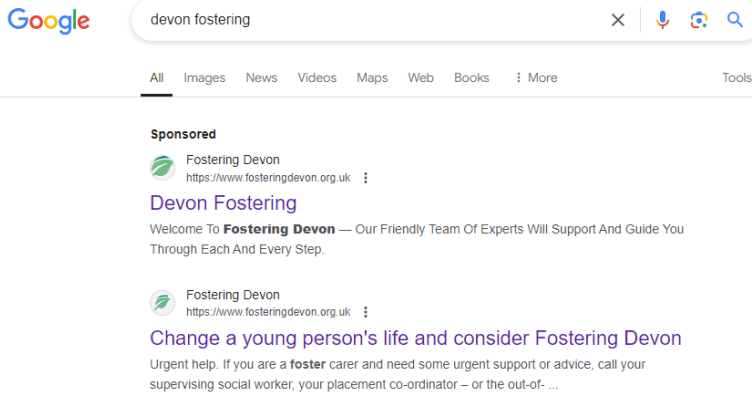


Figure 2 (Left) : A screenshot of a Google search for "devon fostering" on Friday 11th October 2024.

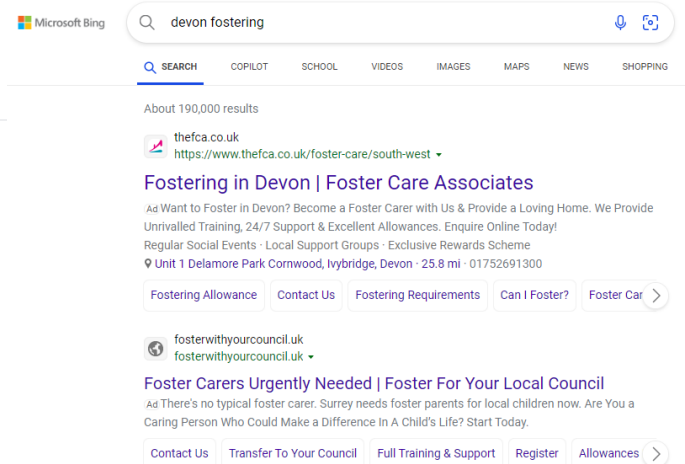


Figure 3 (Right): A screenshot of a Microsoft Bing search for "devon fostering" on Friday 11th October 2024.

- 4.21 Witnesses stressed the importance of a good digital footprint because potential foster carers will ‘shop around’ the different offers and agencies due to the competitiveness of the sector. Witnesses commented on the importance of a ‘flashy’ website which gives the best impression of the service. Witnesses reported that the Council’s, whilst improved, could be improved further and needs to ensure the correct information and policies were easy to find.
- 4.22 The Task Group were also aware that the Council had joined the regional recruitment Fostering Hub – [Fostering South West](#). Fostering South West is a regional partnership of 15 Local Authorities that work collaboratively to recruit prospective foster carers and improve the retention of foster carers.
- 4.23 Witnesses to the Task Group agreed that the best marketing tool and promotion was foster carers themselves and the importance of word of mouth when talking to friends and families in their network. This also included case studies of foster carers lived experience as part of the marketing campaign.
- 4.24 To support the word-of-mouth advertising, some IFAs and Local Authorities have ‘Refer a Friend’ scheme. For example, Bristol City Council offers up to £500 (Bristol City Council, 2024) whilst Foster Care Associates offer up to £3,000 to their foster carers for every friend or family member referred to the organisation that becomes an approved foster carer (Foster Care Associates, 2023).
- 4.25 Of course, this is predicated on foster carers having an excellent experience of fostering, feeling supported and valued and recommending the profession to their friends and family, and some witnesses did not feel, based on their experience, they would be able to refer a friends at the moment, although the Task Group recognised that experiences vary across fostering families.
- 4.26 Witnesses from other local authorities shared their experiences and innovative methods of promoting their services including specialised advertising on TV and on-demand TV programmes, where households can be targeted based on their demographics.

Agenda Item 13

Retention of Foster Carers

Culture and support offered to Foster Carers

- 4.27 Although allowance and rates are important to ensure foster carers are adequately remunerated for their time and skills, it soon became apparent to Members in the Task Group from witnesses that the financial element was not the singular most important part of the offer: feeling supported and valued by the organisation was of significant importance.
- 4.28 Staff highlighted the work and efforts to support foster carers. Examples provided were: the Council's training offer and support groups, the peer mentor support programme, the Council's assessment process and 6 weekly supervision sessions.
- 4.29 Witnesses praised the Promoting Stability Team as an "amazing resource" of wrap around care, as well as Devon's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) service prioritising foster carers when running an 18-week attachment trauma course; this helps to upskill foster carers and can be tailored to meet the needs of children in their care.
- 4.30 The Task Group heard how Mockingbird (see Figure 4), is making a real difference to the support and experience of foster carers. The Mockingbird programme was widely praised by both staff and foster carers who recognised the support network that it enables. Witnesses in the Mockingbird programme expressed feeling less isolated because it mirrors a family network with multiple avenues of support available; Members heard the programme likened to an extended family.
- 4.31 The Task Group were informed that constellations need to be licensed from the Fostering Network and organisations have to purchase 5 constellations a time. In total, with the license and staff needed, 5 constellations cost £255,000 annually. The Task Group felt with the proven impact of the programme, that the Council should continue to commit to and fund additional constellations in the 2025/26 Budget.

What is Mockingbird?

Mockingbird is a programme run by the [Fostering Network](#) to improve foster care and outcomes for children and young people.

The family based model includes a lead Hub Carer and a 'constellation' of other Fostering households, where the Hub Carer acts as a central peer support network, supported by a social worker from the Council.

Devon County Council currently has 5 constellations.



Figure 4: A diagram from the Fostering Network of the Mockingbird programme, showing the Hub Carer and constellation of foster homes.

- **Recommendation 3:** The Council continues to commit to the Mockingbird programme and funds additional constellations in the 2025/26 Budget.

- 4.32 Witnesses highlighted that the Mockingbird project has a proven track record, with few instances of placement break-down. Members, at a Mockingbird event, heard how much foster carers valued being part of the programme.
- 4.33 However, the Task Group heard that foster carers who were not part of Mockingbird programme had different experiences. At 4.2 the Report referenced that some witnesses had told the Task Group that they did not feel valued by the Council.
- 4.34 The Task Group heard from other local authorities, IFAs and foster carers that the support provided to foster carers is essential in helping them feel valued. Witnesses highlighted the importance of ratios of foster carers to Supervising Social Workers to ensure a consistent level of support and the importance of relationships, and knowing there is a member of staff available to help in a crisis.
- 4.35 The Task Group heard from some foster carers that there is poor communication from the service, as a result they do not feeling listened to, or valued by the Council. Members heard examples of disrespectful behaviour towards and the foster carers, this included the cancellation of meetings at short notice, the outcomes of meeting not shared, or long delays/ lack of response to emails. Similar concerns were raised about the Children and Family Assessment (CPAT).
- 4.36 Witnesses acknowledged that the service was trying to make improvements, and that good communication was difficult when there was pressure on staff and competing demands. Towards the latter stages of the Task Group, it was recognised that there was better engagement from the directorate with officers arranging to meet with foster carers and the DCFA to re-build the relationships, understand their concerns and work together on solutions; however in the early stages of the Task Group, the challenges faced by Foster Carers were outlined below.
- 4.37 The Task Group heard from witnesses from the Devon Foster Carers Association (DFCA), who shared their frustrations in engaging with the service, which reduced confidence in raising concerns with the service or as part of the Fostering Strategy Group.
- 4.38 Witnesses also shared varied experiences when trying to access support and respite care. Whilst Mockingbird families could access support through their Hub Carer or others within their constellation, the experience for families who are not in a Mockingbird constellation was different with challenges experienced outside of working hours and delays when trying to contact the Emergency Duty out of hours service.
- 4.39 Foster carers who needed respite shared experiences of trying to make arrangements through the service but faced delays. Foster carers, through their own networks, were able to source support from other foster carers, and inform the local authority of this, so the appropriate processes could then be followed; further reference is made to this at 4.72.
- 4.40 Overall, this witness session painted a picture of a foster carer cohort who were disheartened, felt undervalued and frustrated with the service. Witnesses did reflect that some of the challenges could be resolved simply and would begin to improve the service for foster carers.

Agenda Item 13

- 4.41 Members heard that foster carers wanted to be seen as an asset to the Council, respected and valued. Foster carers who spoke to the Task Group were committed to Devon, wanted to look after Devon's Children and wanted to help improve services.
- 4.42 In reflection, the Task Group themselves discussed how the Council needs to remember that foster carers are a "valuable commodity".
- 4.43 Although a small gesture, witnesses reported that in previous years the Council hosted a celebration event for foster carers which showed the Council valuing its foster carers; awards were given for long service, and the Council showed it appreciated the work of foster carers. Although it was acknowledged the Foster Carer Conference has been reinstated, Members felt that the Celebration event also needed to be reinstated
- **Recommendation 4:** The Council shows it values the work of foster carers and reinstates an annual celebration event thanking foster carers for their service.

IT, Devices and Digital access

- 4.44 Being online with access to IT is a crucial aspect of the work of foster carers allowing them to communicate with their Social Workers, claim for expenses, and to write and submit weekly reports.
- 4.45 The Task Group were told about challenges with IT, and access to devices and technology which at times, made their tasks more difficult e.g. completing and submitting weekly reports on a phone. These issues were raised by both foster carers and staff as challenges with IT can take up staff time, for example, typing up handwritten records to input them into the Council's recording system.
- 4.46 Witnesses highlighted that some foster carers would, as part of the fostering package, benefit from an offer of a laptop or device with IT support. Witnesses expressed that this would help recruit and retain foster carer, noting that Somerset Council and Suffolk County Council offer IT as part of their package, including with access to IT training in Suffolk.
- 4.47 In addition, witnesses requested access to a Devon County Council email address. The Councils use of Egress to protect personal information at times, presented challenges for foster carers. The Task Group heard that Egress software did not allow foster carers to save or retrieve email trails and that foster carers felt unable to keep themselves safe, especially in the event of an allegation against them; it was outlined to the Task Group that access to a Devon County Council email address would address these challenges. Witnesses from other local authorities confirmed the use of corporate email addresses for foster carers, with a separate @ domain specifically for foster carers.
- 4.48 Foster carers highlighted previous attempts to resolve these issues were not successful and advice given to the Task Group related to the cyber security risks to the Council, increased costs and the need to ensure robust procedures were in place to ensure compliance with cyber security training.
- 4.49 Members of the Task Group, taking into account these risks expressed the importance of making recommendations to provide access to a Council email address, and devices as this goes some way to address the concerns raised by witnesses to the Task Group,

and could support the recruitment and retention of foster carers, and builds on learning from other local authorities.

4.50 Members reflected on their own positions as Councillors, as an integral part of the Council although not employees, who were able to access laptops, email addresses and IT support. Members felt strongly that foster carers should be seen in a similar position, as working for and part of the Council.

4.51 The Task Group reflected on the theme of being valued. Many of the witnesses highlighted that, having gone through a robust assessment process and regular training, they are entrusted to look after some of Devon's most vulnerable children, and so should be trusted to look after a laptop and email address, with the relevant training. Witnesses commented on the risks of not extending Devon's offer: foster carers continuing to feel undervalued, a continued decline of foster carer numbers and the resultant impact that would have on the Council's sufficiency of placements for children in care.

4.52 Members suggested recommendations that aim to solve the core issues of access to devices and the issues presented by the Egress system for consideration.

- **Recommendation 5(a and b):** To improve the Council's current offer to foster carers:
 - a) Ensuring access to a laptop or tablet as part of the offer, to support and enable foster carers to carry out their role effectively, and efficiently.
 - b) The Council makes improvements to address the current challenges posed to foster carers by the use of Egress or gives foster carers access to a corporate email address.

4.53 Furthermore, witnesses raised that some local authorities and IFAs have a foster carer portal to enable foster carers to access documents, make recordings, submit claims and forms and access payment information. Witnesses who introduced a portal system highlighted that it ensured the robustness of shared supervision notes, ensured accurate data with foster carers and that many IFAs have had portal systems for a number of years.

4.54 Witnesses commented on a longer-term ambition to introduce a 'Foster Carer' portal to help transform the way the Council. Witnesses to the Task Group outlined that a portal could be considered and would welcome working with other Local Authorities to understand their portal offer.

- **Recommendation 5c:** As part of the Council's digital offer, the Council develops or procures a 'Foster Carer portal' system.

Payments and expenses

4.55 A key area of importance raised by witnesses was delays to the approval of expenses payments; in some cases of a few months. This has become an area of frustration and contributes to the feeling of being undervalued.

4.56 Witnesses reported that remittances forms did not itemise what had been paid. This resulted in foster carers having to manually work out what expenses had been paid and what had not. For some this presents challenges if they are on Universal Credit, or other benefits, or at the end of Financial Year. Witnesses related delays and challenges to,

Agenda Item 13

what they perceived, as an overly complicated and ineffective system to approve expenses.

- 4.57 A potential solution raised by witnesses was access to the Council's iTrent system, to make expenses claims, or a similar digital solution, Members of the Task Group were made aware of challenges with using the iTrent system due to tax implications, and other practical implications.
- 4.58 During the Task Group the Members raised the concerns heard and Council committed to the Task Group to investigate these concerns.
- 4.59 The Task Group recognises that the Council is due to replace both its Finance and Children's Case Management System and that a longer-term digital solution to payments and expenses could be sought.
- **Recommendation 5d:** The Council explores improvements to the payments and expenses process with a longer term view to develop or procure a digital solution for foster carers expenses and payments.

Recruitment and retention of Fostering Social Workers

- 4.60 Although not originally part of the scope, as Members heard from a range of witnesses it became apparent that a stable, supported and valued workforce in the Fostering Service went hand in hand with supported and valued foster carers.
- 4.61 The Task Group heard from a small group of staff who reflected on a significant period of stability in the workforce which they felt was changing. Previously Social Workers had received administrative support from business support officers; this has now changed with staff feeling their workload had increased. The Task Group were aware of a review of business support across the organisation and related improvements to working practices and the use of technology.
- 4.62 The Task Group also heard of feelings of disempowerment as Social Workers are no longer able to approve foster carer expenses, however the Task Group heard that these changes took place following a review of the Council's scheme of delegation which is improving governance and financial controls. The Task Group are aware that the recruitment and retention of Social Workers is a key challenge for the organisation and considered ways to support their capacity and provide more time working directly with family and friends. The Task Group were also aware that the People First Strategy is looking to address these concerns, as is a Children's Services Recruitment and Retention Strategy.
- **Recommendation 6:** Explore improvements in working practices within the fostering service to allow social workers to spend time working with families and young people.
- 4.63 Witnesses told the Task Group about the recruitment and retention scheme regarding allowances and that Children and Families' Social Workers and Supervising Social Workers in the Fostering Service were not in receipt of the allowances. This relates to a previous Cabinet decision in September 2021 ([A Culture for Change in Children's Social Care – recruitment and retention of social workers and front-line managers](#)) which gave a range of additional allowances to experienced Social Workers in 'harder to recruit

teams' including a retention payment of £2000 per annum, and the Council funding the Social Worker Registration Fee payment (£90) per annum. At the time of this package, the Fostering Service was not included as a 'hard to recruit to' team so did not benefit from these additional allowances. Witnesses told the Task Group that, at the time of the decision they felt undervalued.

- **Recommendation 7:** Review the terms, conditions and package available to permanent staff to ensure equitable salaries, benefits and retention payments
- **Recommendation 8:** Review the equity of the policy of paying the £90 per annum Social Work England registration fee to some social workers and not others with the view implementing a fair policy to all social workers.

Continued improvements to practice

4.64 Alongside improved stability in the workforce, witnesses told the Task Group of suggested practice improvements that would support a better working experience for staff and further improve outcomes for foster carers and families.

4.65 Witnesses reported that a number of improvements were being made within the service: the recruitment of two independent fostering reviewing officers to support annual reviews, and the use of the Mind of My Own app which collects feedback from children and young people.

4.66 A key concern that witnesses raised was the inability to fully utilise Coram Baaf (a membership organisation that the Council subscribes too) resources, templates, forms and documents. These are all compliant with the law, best practice and were referred to as the "gold standard" of forms.

4.67 Witnesses shared that in their experience the service is not able to use these resources effectively because the forms cannot be integrated into the Council's current Case Management System. Witnesses expressed that the use of these resources would drive improvements as they were based on the best practices.

- **Recommendation 9:** The Council to ensure the widespread and best use of the range of resources connected to Coram Baaf.

4.68 Linked to the case management system, the Task Group were told that many of the Council's compliance trackers were completed manually such as the 'snapshot'. The 'snapshot' is a tool used to record foster carers allocations and vacancies. Witnesses reported that as the system must be updated manually some of the information is out of date and doesn't show real time reporting. There is also inconsistent access to the database; this presents challenges when trying to plan placements and arrange respite care. The Task Group were informed that the snapshot needs a mass data cleanse to ensure it contains the right information, but this is currently delayed.

What is [Coram Baaf](#)?

coramBAAF
adoption • fostering • kinship

Coram Baaf is a membership organisation for professionals working in adoption, fostering and kinship care who provide information, best practice, advice and training to Members.

Agenda Item 13

- **Recommendation 10:** The Council commits necessary resources to ensure that the 'snapshot' is up to date, regularly reviewed and used effectively.

Training

- 4.69 Witnesses informed the Task Group that the children and young people are entering care with more complex needs and having experienced trauma. Witnesses raised queried whether the current training programme was sufficient to give new and existing foster the skills to equip them with the skills needed to support the children and young people's more complex needs.
- 4.70 The Task Group heard varied perspectives about the content of the Skills to Foster programme. There was a recognition of the need to strike a balance between the training helping foster carers understand their role, while also not wanting to deter new foster carers from continuing in the profession. The Task Group pursued this line of enquiry and heard that being a foster carer is not an easy profession and the range of needs young people have means it was not possible to include every example and experience in the initial Skills to Foster training programme; with each foster carer having different skills and experience, which ought to also be recognised.
- 4.71 Suggestions to improve the training programme included:
- 'To add Safer Carer' and 'Protecting yourself from allegations' to the Core training offer,
 - That core training should be completed by the adults within the fostering household, not just the lead carer. Witnesses highlighted instances where secondary carers (e.g. partners and spouses) needed additional training, and
 - That an up-to-date foster carers Handbook needs to be issued.
- 4.72 The Task Group was informed by the service that training is one of the workstreams to support and deliver improvements, and that each foster carer now has a personalised development plan.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 Feeling valued was the key theme that emerged across the witness sessions, particularly with staff and foster carers. Members recognised that Devon's staff and foster carers do an incredible job each and every day for the children and young people of Devon and reflected that the Council needs to do more to show it values their work.
- 5.2 Members of the Task Group wish to express their thanks to all of the witnesses who gave up their time to speak to the Task Group, as well as those who submitted written evidence to the Task Group.
- 5.3 Members also want to express their thanks to the foster carers in Devon, who take children and families as their own, make them a part of their family and try to make their lives better. Members expressed their utmost admiration for the work of foster carers and hope this Task Group report faithfully expresses the lived experiences, challenges and rewards of being a foster carer. The Task Group expressed many times that foster carers are a significant commodity to the Council and that foster carers need to be celebrated with long service recognised. Members felt that foster carers, although not employees, were integral to the Council and needed to be treated as such.

5.4 The Task Group are aware of a number of different work streams within the Council and the Fostering Service that are ongoing at the time of Report publication. It is hoped this Report will complement this work and ensure that the views of Members are part of the process to improve the Fostering Service and lived experience of foster carers and foster families, as well as children and young people.

6. Membership

Councillors Philip Sanders (Chair), Tracy Adams (Vice Chair), Janet Bradford, Frank Letch MBE, Linda Hellyer and Pru Maskell.

7. Contact

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8. Sources of Evidence

Task Group Activity

The Task Group undertook a range of evidence gathering activity including:

- Fostering Service and Mockingbird Children’s Scrutiny Masterclass (8th January 2024).
- Scoping meeting with the Deputy Director, Head of Service and Cabinet Member (7th May 2024).
- Witness sessions, using semi-structured interviews (Tuesday 16th July, Monday 22nd July and Tuesday 30th July, 24th September, 1st October and 16th October 2024).
- Member attendance at the Mockingbird Celebration event (Tuesday 6th August 2024).
- Receipt and consideration of additional written evidence from:
 - a) Maria Chakraborty, Director of People and Culture – Devon County Council
 - b) Martin Lawrence, Strategic Information Governance Manager – Devon County Council
 - c) Roger Jenkins, IT Business Partner – Devon County Council
 - d) 1 x staff in the Fostering Service
 - e) 1 x foster carer
 - f) Naomi Pollard, Registered Manager - Foster Carer Associates South West
 - g) Marie Tucker, Consultant – CICADA Services
- Desk research completed by the Democratic Services & Scrutiny Secretariat.

Witnesses

The Task Group heard testimony from a number of witnesses and would like to express sincere thanks to the following people for their contribution and the information shared.

Witness	Organisation	Role
Councillor Andrew Leadbetter	Devon County Council	Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and Schools
Steve Liddicott	Devon County Council	Deputy Director – Head of Children’s Health and Wellbeing
Emily Hextall	Devon County Council	Head of Service – Fostering

Agenda Item 13

Emma Nobes	Devon County Council	Service Manager – Fostering and Promoting Stability
Claire Bennett	Devon County Council	Team Manager
Joann Mclear	Devon County Council	Team Manager
Mandy King	Devon County Council	Advanced Social Worker
Sally Willox	Devon County Council	Advanced Social Worker
Annie Monaghan	Devon County Council	Experienced Social Worker
Beccy Ede	Devon County Council	Supervising Social Worker
Alice Wasley	Devon County Council	Fostering Enquiry Line Practitioner
Teresa Coventry	Devon County Council	Senior Therapeutic Fostering Practitioner
Craig Davies	Devon County Council	Family Practitioner
Councillor Andrew Saywell	Devon County Council	Cabinet Member for Organisational Development, Workforce & Digital Transformation
Matthew Jones	Devon County Council	Director of Transformation & Business Services
Suzzane Lyus	Devon County Council	Interim Head of Service – Fostering
Martin Lawrence	Devon County Council	Strategic Information Governance Manager and Data Protection Officer
Roger Jenkins	Devon County Council	ICT Business Partner
Marie Tucker	CICADA Services	Consultant
James Johnson	Action for Children	Team Manager – Fostering South West Peninsula and Family Breaks Devon
Leigh Strange	Devon Foster Carers Association	Chair
Pete Ashman	Devon Foster Carers Association	Member
Sarah Bradley	Devon Foster Carers Association	Member
Belinda Cockwill	Devon Foster Carers Association	Member
Annie Oliver	Devon Foster Carers Association	Member
Glyn Oliver	Devon Foster Carers Association	Member
Cathy Parker	Devon Foster Carers Association	Member
Daniel Moncrieff	Somerset Council	Head of Service - Fostering
Sarah Ablett	Suffolk County Council	Service Manager - Fostering and Sufficiency
Helena Chammings	Suffolk County Council	Practice Manager - Recruitment, Assessment and Matching

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