

Children and Families Service Response to the CYP Scrutiny Commission Recommendations in relation to foster carer recruitment and retention.

Please note that this document is an update to [the last report to CYP Scrutiny Commission on foster carer recruitment in October 2019](#).

Recommendation	Update
<p>Recommendation One</p> <p>It is recommended that when the local looked after children sufficiency strategy is updated, measures to ensure the retention of foster carers are included which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Provide for individualised training programmes for in-house foster carers; (ii) Are informed by regular surveys and consultations with foster carers where such information will help to identify where the local support offer is sufficient and what could be improved; (iii) Are informed by systematic exit interviews conducted with all those foster carers who deregister from the in-house service, to help identify those trends or patterns which may impact on a decision to leave; (iv) Are underpinned by a package of remuneration which is regularly benchmarked against other neighbouring local authorities; (v) Ensure that foster carers are provided with training and development opportunities which enable them to progress through the foster carer banding system so that each year (at least): - 8 level 1 carers progress to level 2; and - 4 level 2 carers progress to level 3 	<p>A new 3 year Sufficiency Strategy for 2023-2025 is in the planning process. Measures to recruit and retain our in-house foster carers will be a strong focus of this strategy.</p> <p>There is a robust training offer in place for our foster carers, which is reviewed annually in response to feedback from carers, information about their training and support needs highlighted in their annual review process and in response to the emerging needs of our children. Our in-house training programme is supplemented by additional training offered through the North London Consortium. During lockdown training was delivered virtually and whilst this enhanced accessibility for some carers, from September 2022 we will be reintroducing in person training following feedback from our carers, with a plan to take a hybrid approach going forward. The training offer continues to support carers to move through our 3 skills levels, which is linked to their rates of pay. We currently have 64 Level 2 foster carers and 17 Level 3 carers.</p> <p>We carry out an annual survey with our foster carers to gain their feedback on the service and to help inform our priorities for the year ahead. The last survey was completed in January 2022. Joint foster carer / fostering service forums also take place on a regular basis, to exchange information and ideas about service development, in addition to monitoring meetings with the Hackney Foster Carers Council Committee. Exit interviews are taking place for all carers that leave the service through resignation or deregistration. The fostering service continues to work closely with the North London</p>

- (vi) Set out how to increase the number of in-house foster carers that are trained to become Foster Carer Ambassadors from 6 to 12.
- (vii) Ensure that foster carers who are the subject of allegations or concerns about their practice or standards of care should have access to independent support to assist them to clarify the stages of the procedure and help them to represent their point of view;
- (viii) Ensure that there is sufficient respite (in respect of duration and quality) for foster carers.

Consortium to ensure that our package of remuneration is in line with our neighbouring boroughs. This is looked at on an annual basis.

Our fostering ambassador number has remained consistent and 6 out of the 13 ambassadors are also now trained to deliver the Skills to Foster bitesize training sessions. These are 2-hour online introductory sessions delivered to prospective foster carers.

The service and the Hackney Foster Carer Council (HFCC) have been working together to review our policies and have just looked again at the allegations policy to make improvements. Foster Carers who are subject to allegations are offered access to independent advice through the Fostering Network, as well as peer support through the HFCC.

There have been no changes in relation to respite since the last update in October 2019. Each carer is offered 14 days respite per year, please refer to the previous update for further information. Where carers are caring for particularly complex children, for example, those with multiple health needs, we will always consider whether bespoke arrangements for additional help (including respite) need to be put in place to support both the care arrangement and the health and well-being of our carers. The level of respite on offer has not been an issue that has been raised by carers with us as a cause for concern in recent years.

Recommendation Two

It is recommended that the Fostering Service should develop a new, ambitious and long-term local foster carer recruitment strategy. This strategy should:

We have a [Fostering Recruitment and Retention Strategy 2022/3](#) that has been shared with the Committee and forms the basis of the report provided to Scrutiny, with additional information added as requested by the Chairs. This strategy explores the areas outlined here. The strategy is reviewed and updated on an annual basis. Unlikely the overall picture nationally and in comparison to many of our London neighbours, our fostering recruitment figures continue to be strong. We currently have 170 in-house fostering

- (i) Be informed by a local needs analysis of its population of looked after children to determine the types of care placements required and the skills and experience required of foster carers (e.g. those looking after teenagers, complex needs and SEND);
- (ii) Set ambitious targets for the recruitment of in-house foster carers in the short, medium and long term: 23 new recruits per year should be the new target.
- (iii) Adopt an 'Always Be Recruiting' approach, which seeks to maximise Hackney Fostering Service presence, engagement and recruitment at all council and other local events;
- (iv) Seek to encompass and target under-represented groups, who may not traditionally associate themselves with fostering or do not feel that they have the right skills or experience (e.g. the childless, under 35s, single people, men and the LGBTQi community);
- (v) Develop recruitment campaigns which focus on the specific needs of looked after children and the required skills of foster carers (e.g. teenagers, complex needs, parent and child);
- (vi) Maximise the use of word of mouth interventions, such as through the Foster Carer Ambassadors scheme;
- (vii) Ensure that there is a dedicated and high profile on-line foster carer recruitment presence (given the importance of this and the limited local resource, it should be explored whether this function could be provided jointly across participating boroughs in the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium);

households, which is a significant increase from 128 when the Scrutiny met on this issue in 2018. We have also recruited 13 Supported Lodgings host and continue to have regular inquiries from those interested in becoming both foster carers and supported lodgings hosts. The most common barrier to progressing inquiries are the available space in potential carers homes for fostering: potential carers must have at least one spare room.

The Fostering Recruitment team continues to explore new opportunities to promote fostering opportunities in Hackney, with recent examples including a presence at the Anti-Racist Practice Conference events, London Pride and a recent Hackney Museum event focusing on the stories of some of our unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people.

We have an online fostering recruitment presence - <https://hackney.gov.uk/fostering> - and continue to use Facebook and Instagram as platforms for advertising, as well as other online resources such as QA Education, Education for Everyone, SEN magazine, Premier Radio, South East Lifestyle Gaydio Radio and What's On. We have recently spoken with Archant Media to explore their new online provisions and how this may be utilised to support recruitment. We continue to explore opportunities to engage with new platforms that would help us target under-represented groups in our fostering cohort, for example, advertising in the Orthodox Jewish press. Overall we have found that maintaining a commitment to promoting fostering in Hackney in a diverse range of platforms has enabled us to continue to recruit carers from different backgrounds and life experiences. Specific cohorts of carers we continue to be particularly keen to recruit are those from the Orthodox Jewish community, parent and child carers, carers able to look after adolescents with complex presenting needs and carers from the LGBTQi community.

- (viii) Ensure that recruitment campaigns are responsive and enquiries for in-house foster carers are dealt with promptly (at the latest, the next day).
- (ix) Seek to refocus recruitment across a broader range of housing tenures, seeking potential recruits in both the privately owned and privately rented sector (where there may be greater housing capacity).

We have continued to engage in online advertising with the North London Consortium and have an advert on the New Family Social website. Our Regional Adoption Agency - Adopt London North - have very positive feedback on their experiences of improving marketing and recruitment when pooling resources in the Adopt London family. There is potential considerable scope to learn lessons from this model in fostering and Josh McAllistair's recent review recommended further exploration of the scope for a more regional fostering approach by local authorities.

Recommendation Three

The Commission understands that the Council has been running a pilot scheme offering up to 4 larger properties to experienced foster carers to enable them to take on additional placements of looked after children. It would be beneficial if this scheme was formalised and agreed, reflecting approaches taken in the neighbouring boroughs of Camden and Islington.

It is therefore recommended that the Council:

- (a) Allocate 4 larger (2-4 bedroom) properties to the Fostering Service each year to enable experienced, long term foster carers to provide additional placements, particularly for teenagers (as per the Camden model);
- (b) Give priority to adult children in foster carer households in local social housing allocation policies, to enable foster carers to take on additional placements for looked after children (as per the Islington model).

In 2022, we have had one carer be offered a 4 bedroom council property by Housing colleagues, which enables her to offer a home to more foster children. Her home is in a new build scheme. It is a challenge to find carers that are appropriate for the scheme due to the specific criteria. However, with all carers who do meet the criteria, this scheme is reviewed with them periodically. The scheme is only available for carers that meet the following criteria, who are in the minority:

- The foster family must be Hackney residents and have lived continuously in Hackney for 3 or more years.
- Tenants must be living in Council or Registered Provider (RP) properties and paying a social rent. The RP must reciprocate the property vacated by the tenant to Hackney Council and agree to the reciprocal, in writing, to Hackney Lettings Department, prior to the tenant being accepted onto the scheme. The scheme is not open to owner-occupiers or those living in private rented accommodation.

Last year we also successfully negotiated with housing colleagues that connected carers who were Hackney tenants and overcrowded because of their willingness to take on the care of a Hackney looked after child, would receive priority status for a move to a larger Council home. We believe this will help improve the stability of these care arrangements, particularly in adolescence, when we know from experience overcrowding can cause significant tension in family relationships.

There has not been any change since the October 2019 update in relation to any agreement around priority housing being given to adult children in the foster carer households. Given the significant pressures on the current social housing provision, discussions with housing colleagues suggest it is not feasible to take this suggestion forward at this time.

Recommendation Four

To bring the Hackney offer into line with other north east London boroughs (e.g. Waltham Forest, Redbridge), the Council should consider the introduction of a Council Tax reduction scheme for foster carers. Such a scheme should:

- (a) Reflect a level of discount commensurate to the experience and longevity of foster carers (e.g. in alignment with the current banding system e.g. 33% for level 1, 66% for level 2 and 100% for level 3);
- (b) Provide greater discounts for the care of looked after children who are difficult to match to suitable placements (e.g. children aged 13-17, or parent and child placements);
- (c) Acknowledge that not all foster carers live within Hackney and will not be eligible to benefit from such a scheme, and therefore provide them with an annual retainer payment (also based on experience).

There have been ongoing discussions over the past year about how we can move this recommendation forward and we are aware this is a key ask from our Foster Carers Council. A commitment to this in principle has been agreed by CLT and we are currently working with our Council Tax colleagues to design a system to offer Council Tax exemption for Hackney foster carers living in Hackney, along the lines of the current Council Tax exemption for Hackney care leavers living in Hackney. This would require a change to the Council's Council Tax policy (under Section 13(A)) that would need to be ratified at Cabinet and therefore discussed there before the end of the year, in order to be included in the Annual Report in early 2023 and rolled out from the new financial year.

We are conscious of issues of fairness and equity in relation to the carers who do not live in Hackney (currently only 93 of our 170 fostering households live within Hackney). In discussion with finance colleagues, we are exploring an additional payment that could be added to the weekly fees as a set contribution to their out of borough Council Tax bills, as the most simple, straightforward and equitable way of making an offer to them to support them with their Council Tax bills. Again, our plan is to include this proposal in a report to Cabinet before the end of the year.

Recommendation Five

The Commission understands that Hackney foster carers already have access to cultural, leisure and other opportunities to support their role. The Commission recommends that the Fostering Service reviews these and explores other opportunities that might be available for foster carers through other services of the Council and local community and voluntary sector (and consult with current foster carers about what would be helpful or appealing to them).

Following discussions with HFCC over recent months about the impact on them of the cost of living crisis, we have been exploring ways to offer additional support to carers. The service is in the process of looking at two options for discount cards for carers (the Blue Light card <https://www.bluelightcard.co.uk/> and the Carers First card <https://www.carersfirst.org.uk/get-support/>) to ensure all approved carers have access to additional resources and a wide range of discount offers in light of the rise in the cost of living. Our plan is to purchase a card for each approved carer, once we have reached a decision about the best option to go for in the next month or so.

We continue to send out a quarterly newsletter to our foster and connected carers where current events and support organisations in the borough are advertised to carers. We continue to have a close working relationship with the Hackney Foster Carer Council (HFCC) to ascertain what would be helpful and appealing to carers.

Recommendation Six

Whilst the vacancy rate in Hackney is on a par with, if not better than, the national average, evidence given to the Commission from foster carers would suggest that foster carers are not being utilised as much as they would like, and was a factor in some carers' decisions to de-register. Thus, as well as recruiting more in-house foster carers, it was evident that better use could be made of the existing pool of foster carers. It is recommended that the Council:

- (i) Consider the implementation of the 'Step Up Step Down' programme - which seeks to utilise in-house foster carers

We continue to seek new opportunities to make the most of the skills, knowledge and experience of our in-house foster carers, for example, offering outreach support for children in residential homes, as part of their preparation to move back to foster care, or to offer additional support to foster carers who are struggling with a care arrangement. In line with our commitment to anti-racist parenting, we have also drawn more heavily in recent months on in-house carers to offer mentoring and support to Black and Global Majority children who are living at a distance from Hackney, to support them around their cultural and identity needs.

As discussed in recommendation 1 our ambassadors have remained consistent and 6 out of the 13 ambassadors are also now trained to deliver the skills to foster bitesize sessions. We also now have 3

<p>to provide additional preventative support to those children on the edge of the care system;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (ii) As per the Islington model, consider whether in-house foster carer vacancies can be used to support placements in other boroughs, such as within the NL Consortium or further afield; (iii) Increase the number of Foster Carer Ambassadors in Hackney to extend the capacity for targeted outreach recruitment and to support newly appointed foster carers (increase from current 6 to 12); (iv) Consider further ways in which peer support mechanisms can be used to support fostering practice and increase the skills and knowledge base of local in-house foster carers and their ability to provide a wider range of foster placements; (v) Develop the skill base of the existing pool of foster carers to better enable them to support the needs of looked after children in Hackney, particularly those looking after young adolescents aged 13 and above and parent and child placements. 	<p>Mockingbird constellations that have provided a strong community of support for carers and children that are a part of the model. We continue to pair newly approved carers with more experienced carers to offer them additional mentoring support.</p> <p>Each year the training offer is reviewed and developed in line with the needs of Looked After Children in Hackney, feedback from carers and through the fostering Annual Review process.</p> <p>We have introduced out of hours support with matching to our EDT service, via our Matching Consultant. This has had some very successful results so far in terms of successful emergency matches with in-house carers being made in the evenings. Previously, no carers were willing to consider taking on a new care arrangement out of hours, which meant all children needing an alternative care arrangement in an emergency situation out of hours ended up moving to IFA carers or semi-independent accommodation. When children come into care, being placed with an in-house carer, who we can work closely with around their needs and is much more likely to be in or around Hackney, means that we can help minimise the disruption to them (for example, in terms of their educational provision or contact with friends and family) and levels of anxiety, whilst longer-term plans for their care are being explored.</p>
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<p>Recommendation Seven</p> <p>It is recommended that the Council develop a joint working protocol with partner IFAs which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Addresses issues around the quality and cost of foster care placements; 	<p>We are aware of our dependency on IFAs to care for our children on a regular basis and our Placement Management Unit (PMU) invests in the relationships with IFAs e.g. through regular information sharing and feedback, particularly those we tend to have more children living with or we know have carers living in and around Hackney. Wherever we have a choice of potential care arrangements, we will prioritise foster homes with those IFAs we know and trust. When issues are identified with the</p>
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- (ii) Seeks to develop usage of foster carers in the IFA sector in a planned way which enables both IFAs and the LA to plan more effectively;
- (iii) Allows for more effective commissioning and contract management (quality and outcomes of placements);
- (iv) Enables IFAs and the LA to work cooperatively in line with the Leeds model which seeks to increase the number of 'local solutions for looked after children' by seeking to maximise the use of foster care placements in Hackney (irrespective of which sector foster carers may work for) to help develop and maintain strong support networks for children and their carers.

care provided by an IFA carer, Senior Managers from the Fostering Service and/or PMU will support the child's Social Work Unit in addressing these with the IFA. Where a training or development need is identified for an IFA carer that their agency cannot meet and we are committed to the plan of a child remaining with them long-term, we may open up our in-house training opportunities to these carers, for example, our Nurturing Attachments Training. There have been a number of IFA carers who we have offered the opportunity to become part of a Mockingbird Constellation, as we feel this will enhance the care experience they offer to our children.

Our PMU previously ran a very successful provider forum, which was well attended by IFA partners, in order to share information about us and our children and the care arrangements we are looking for, whilst building relationships with other fostering agencies. We are planning a further forum in the new year, with a focus on our commitment to anti-racist practice and what this looks like for us in the context of our expectations about the anti-racist parenting experiences we expect all our commissioned care arrangements to deliver.

Recommendation Eight

It is recommended that the Council and Fostering Service continue to engage and further develop its relationship with the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium (NLAFC) and identify additional opportunities for collaborative partnerships, particularly in relation to:

We remain part of the North London Consortium alongside Camden, Islington, Haringey, Barnet and Enfield. As a Consortium, we work closely together, for example, to regularly review our policies in order to share best practice and to ensure our positions are aligned as much as possible. There are ongoing discussions within the Consortium about the cost of living crisis and the impact on foster carers, for example, as well as with challenges in care arrangements and how best we can support carers to meet the complex needs of our children in care. For carers who care for babies whose plan is adoption, carers

- (i) Effective commissioning of services to support the training and development of foster carers, particularly specialist support;
- (ii) Increased capacity (finance and expertise) for the recruitment of foster carers particularly those with specialist skills or experience (e.g. looking after teenagers, SEND, parent and child etc.);
- (iii) Identify ways in which it can work collaboratively with the IFA sector.

and their supervising social workers also benefit from additional support around adoption transitions from Adopt London North.

The Consortium is supported by a jointly commissioned Consortium Manager, who is very experienced and knowledgeable about the sector. In addition to offering training to staff and carers across consortium boroughs himself, he also manages a commissioning budget for specialist training made available to carers from across the 6 boroughs, such as The Great Behaviour Breakdown, which is a particular parenting approach for children with complex needs. Carers from Hackney also get to meet regularly with other carers across the consortium in forums where they are able to share advice and ideas.

We continue to have joint advertising campaigns with the North London Consortium. This has been a positive way to also recruit across neighbouring boroughs. We have engaged in online advertising with the Consortium with an advert on the New Family Social website.

Recommendation Nine

The Education Select Committee at the Houses of Parliament conducted a review of Fostering Services in 2017 and has published its report in January 2018 (House of Commons, 2018). This report has in turn contributed to the Government's fostering stocktake, which has been undertaken by Sir Martin Narey on behalf of the Department of Education (Narey & Overs, 2018).

An update of the Fostering Service's response to the Narey report (the Fostering Stocktake), the Education Select Committee report on fostering, and the Government's response was shared at the Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission meeting in March 2019.

The report of the Education Select Committee makes a number of recommendations, including the establishment of a national foster carer recruitment campaign.

It is recommend that when the Fostering Service report back to the Commission in 6 months, it also includes a response to those recommendations contained within both the Education Select Committee and Department of Education national stocktake reports, particularly those relating to recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Recommendation Ten

The Commission took evidence from both local officers and national bodies on the Mockingbird Scheme, a hub and spoke approach to establish a network of support to local foster carers. Evidence presented to the review suggested that this model can offer more support to foster carers, maintain and engage local foster carers and improve the nature and level of care provided to looked after children. The Fostering Network is working with a number of areas to pilot the Mockingbird approach.

It is recommended that the Fostering Service should actively engage with the Fostering Network to identify if Hackney can be included within the existing pilot scheme or within any planned future roll-out of this approach to foster care.

We launched our first Mockingbird Constellation in August 2019. We now have a further 2 Mockingbird Constellations, launched at the end of 2021 and early 2022. Our three hub carers (the carers who coordinate the activities of each constellation and offer regular planned sleepovers for children within their constellations) live in Hackney, Barnet and South Woodford. The Barnet hub was the first hub and has 6 households attached to the hub, the South Woodford hub was the second constellation and includes 7 households. The third constellation is the Hackney hub and there are 9 households involved.

The South Woodford hub have been on a number of trips together, most recently they have been to Paradise Park and Aqua Bounce. The Hackney hub took a recent trip to the south of France for a short break to the holiday home of the Hub carers, and they are already looking forward to going again with more of the constellation members. The Barnet hub took advantage of the recent hot weather to hold their

annual BBQ and have also been on a caravan holiday together this summer.

Feedback from children and carers involved in a consultation is that the sense of community and support within these networks is experienced as invaluable. We hope to launch a further consultation in 2023. Our vision for the future is that in time all Hackney Foster Carers will be part of a Mockingbird constellation.