



Report of the Director of Children & Families

Report to Executive Board

Date: 21st October 2020

Subject: Fostering Service Annual Report



Are specific electoral wards affected? If yes, name(s) of ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Has consultation been carried out?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Will the decision be open for call-in?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, access to information procedure rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary

1. Main issues

- It is a National minimum standard requirement that the Executive Board receives reports on the management and outcomes of the fostering service. This report covers the financial year 2019/20.

2. Best Council Plan Implications (click [here](#) for the latest version of the Best Council Plan)

In addition to promoting and supporting delivery of the priorities set out in the Best Council Plan and Children and Young People's Plan the review and recommendations set out within this report are also underpinned by the council's core value to spend money wisely.

Improving educational attainment and closing achievement gaps for children and young people vulnerable to poor learning outcomes

- Improving social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing
- Helping young people into adulthood, to develop life skills and be ready for work
- Enhancing the city now and for future generations

Linked Best Council plan priorities:

- ***making Leeds the best city for children and young people to grow up in*** by ensuring that children grow up in Foster Care arrangements are encouraged and supported within a family context.
- ***keeping people safe from harm and promoting community respect and resilience*** by enabling children living away from their birth parents have the support of a caring adult able to provide parenting responsibilities

Linked Children and Young People's Plan

- ***help children and parents to live in safe, supportive and loving families*** by ensuring that children who can't live with their parents are supported by a caring adult able to provide parenting responsibilities
- ***ensure that the most vulnerable are supported*** by providing adequate and effective support to Foster Carers so that they can provide safe and loving homes for children and young people
- ***support families to give children the best start in life*** by enabling children to live in Foster placements at the earliest opportunity.

3. Resource Implications

- This report does not request any further resources and the implications of any changes anticipated within this report will be met from existing resources.
- A whole system review is currently being undertaken by the Childrens and Families directorate. The focus of the review is to develop and deliver a clear plan around service delivery and savings. The fostering service is being considered alongside other children and family services within that review.

Recommendations

That the Executive Board receives this report and continues to support the work of the Fostering Service and promote best outcomes for children.

That the Executive Board support the following specific recommendations;

- To increase the number of current foster care placements available to children and young people cared for by Leeds and to reduce the use of external residential and Independent Fostering Agency placements for children cared for by Leeds.
- To develop the offer, in partnership with Child Friendly Leeds, of additional activities and enrichment for fostering families.
- To increase the diversity of our foster carers so that it matches that of the communities we serve and the children we care for.
- To increase our ability to meet a wide range of children's complex needs by developing a broader service offer underpinned by an enhanced training programme.
- To continue with our work with colleagues in West Yorkshire to improve and enhance the offer for Foster Carers taking on Special Guardianship Orders.
- For Leeds City Council to achieve 'Foster Friendly Employer' status.

- Note that the officer responsible for the implementation is the Deputy Head of Service, Corporate Parenting.

1. Purpose of this report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report as set out in regulations is to inform the Executive Board about the work undertaken by the fostering service between April 2019 and March 2020. The report updates the Board on activity in relation to the recruitment and retention of foster carers and developments within the service.

2. Background information

- 2.1 A key priority for the Leeds City Council as a is to ensure that children can be brought up safely with their birth parents or within their wider extended family network. Where it is identified that children cannot remain within their family, the fostering service contributes to improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people who are looked after.2.2 In Leeds the number of children who are looked after has slightly increased this year. The number of children in the age group 0-4 age has increased and the numbers of young people in the age group 16-17 becoming looked after forms the largest increase from last year.

Number of children looked after by age group 2015-20:

Period	Age Range				Total	Rate per 10,000 children
	0-4	5-10	11-15	16-17		
2015	296	378	394	188	1256	78
2016	237	354	417	224	1232	76
2017	229	340	440	242	1251	76
2018	255	329	458	231	1273	76
2019	264	304	451	258	1277	77
2020	283	319	459	283	1344	80*

* Current provisional figure

- 2.2 The 2019 rate for Children Looked After per 10,000 children in Leeds remains below that of other core cities (90) and statistical neighbours (88), just above the Y&H average (74) and above the figure for England (65). Figures for 2020 are not available at this stage
- 2.3 Changes to the recent figures are driven by an increase in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and a reduction in the number of children leaving care. These figures may rise further as the Council increases the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children it cares for as part of the National Transfer Scheme, reflecting greater overall demand at a national level.

3. Main issues

3.1 Recruitment and Retention

- 3.1.1 Our ambition is to achieve a net gain of foster carers on an annual basis keeping more children and young people in Leeds; close to their families and communities. Overall this year (2019/20) we have increased the number of placements by 30.
- 3.1.2 Increasing the number of in house foster placements within Leeds will improve outcomes for children, allowing children to continue to attend their existing school, continue to take part in leisure and social activities and retain links with their wider family and community network. Overall, across all fostering provision we saw a small increase in capacity from 2018. There was growth in Kinship care, Holiday care and Short Care and a slight reduction in Staying put provision. During 2019 we saw no change in the overall numbers of Foster Carers within the cohort, but we did see a slight increase in level 4 and level 3 carers and a slight reduction in level 1 and 2 carers.
- 3.1.3 Whilst improving outcomes for children and young people; this objective also aims to reduce spend on external residential and independent fostering placements in line with the Children and Families Directorate budget strategy. This would involve realigning internal resources to focus on reducing costs while maintaining outcomes, with a view to moving some external residential and Independent Fostering Agency placements to in-house or Leeds Foster Carer provision. Recent months have seen a change in placement mix with a reduction in external residential placements and secure welfare placements.
- 3.1.4 We plan to achieve this by combining a broad range of recruitment activity to increase the numbers of foster carers working for Leeds with an imaginative enrichment offer to our existing foster carers ensuring they feel well supported, valued and satisfied in their role as Leeds carers. The enrichment offer is offered partly by the Fostering Service and partly by Child Friendly Leeds (CFL) who offer a range of opportunities developed in conjunction with CFL ambassador network.
- 3.1.5 The enrichment offer covered a range of sporting and leisure activities. In August children took part in canoeing and water sports through support from Central Yorkshire Scouts. Children were able to attend the ICC World Cup and to watch a Leeds Rhino's rugby league game. Young people attended the Bradford Literary Festival and took part in den building and pond dipping. In all 950 tickets were provided across 350 different events and 23 projects through the work of Child Friendly Leeds
- 3.1.6 The Fostering Service plays a key role in our overarching strategy to reduce the number of young people living in residential care and improve outcomes for children and young people. To do this we need to increase the overall number of Foster Carers, maintain our current good levels of retention and develop a more differentiated offer that meets the varying needs of our children.
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3.2 Recruitment

- 3.2.1 Over the last twelve months there has been an increase in the number of fostering households from 768 in April 2019 to 819 in March 2020. This is largely accounted for by the growth in Kinship fostering.
- 3.2.2 40 new fostering households (not including kinship) were approved during this period which was a similar figure to the previous twelve months. The recruitment of new foster carers is a competitive business with a large number of Independent Fostering Agencies operating in the Leeds area.
- 3.2.3 The total number of registrations of interest in the year ending March 2020 was 702 which is nearly 200 up on the previous year and is a reflection of the recruitment activity delivered by the team. Although on average 10% of inquiries convert into completed positive assessments so as these work their way through our processes in the current year the projected figure for 2020/21 should exceed this year's 40.
- 3.2.4 A total of 91 fostering and kinship households were deregistered in the last year. The reasons are varied. The majority of deregistration's are for positive reasons such as kinship carers taking out Special Guardianship Order's or children returning to parents. Similarly with mainstream foster carers deregistration is mainly due retirement or a change of circumstances. It is encouraging that none of our foster carers transferred to an IFA and only one moved to a neighbouring local authority suggesting a high level of satisfaction with working for Leeds.
- 3.2.5 The team of recruitment Fostering Advisors has been very active in communities where we historically have not had as strong an interest in fostering. The team manager has taken the lead with a proactive social media campaign and has led our new initiative, Faith in Fostering, which has involved us entering into a partnership with two faith organisations, Muslim and Christian, to promote fostering in their respective communities. However, we recognise that we have further work to do improve engagement with all our communities in Leeds.
- 3.2.6 We have also been working to increase the number of Foster Carers who can care for children with Disabilities. Our '100 Helping Hands' initiative was developed and marketed with the help of some of the young people we currently look after and has proved to be successful. The initiative began in 2019/20 as a specific programme to increase foster families who are able to look after children with disabilities. We have had 3 new families come through the full process who are now able to care for children and we have another 10 who are currently working their way through the assessment and registration process, with several others in the early stages of learning more about fostering and confirming their interest.

3.3 Retention

- 3.3.1 An increasingly broad range of enrichment opportunities are being made available to fostering households which include organised trips, celebration events and an expansion of our Herd Farm residential offer to foster families. We have recently purchased and renovated a holiday lodge near Harrogate which foster families can book for short holidays. The lodge was renovated and made ready by foster carers and they were supported by local business who donated materials or tools.
- 3.3.2 These activities are very well received by our foster carers. 17 families have so far used the lodge since its launch in early summer. The Lodge was opened by the Lead Member for Children's Services and has received very positive feedback from foster families who have used it. We are keen to develop our offer to foster families to support them in the care of our children and are always looking for how we can add to the offer of support they currently receive.
- 3.3.3 The Fostering Recruitment Team also works very closely with the Child Friendly Leeds Enrichment Team on providing enriching and life enhancing activities, experiences and opportunities for children in care.
- 3.3.4 The enrichment offer is increasing year on year with Child Friendly Leeds working with their existing and newly signed up ambassadors, to provide opportunities based on their corporate social responsibility interests, for children and young people. The 'enrichment offer' consists of ticket offers, projects and activities, events and gifting. These activities and opportunities are shared with foster carers via a weekly e-mail newsletter.
- 3.3.5 During the pandemic, activities and opportunities have been affected with many planned events being cancelled or postponed to 2021. Colleagues from Child Friendly Leeds and the Fostering Service have continued to meet regularly to:
- share online ideas and activities with families via child friendly Leeds blogsite
 - survey children and young people in care about their experiences during lockdown and what activities they'd like to do as lockdown eases
 - liaise with businesses and CFL ambassadors about working together in the future
 - developing resources that explain the CFL team's work that can be used at foster carer support groups and team meetings
- 3.3.6 More detail about the CFL enrichment offer can be found in the Annual report which was received by Executive Board on 12 February 2020.

3.4 Mocking Bird

- 3.4.1 As reported in our last report we established a number of Mocking Bird hubs to provide support to our Foster Carers. During the year 2019/20 these have developed further and built on the capacity developed during 2018/19. We currently run 10 hubs across the city. One hub provides support to families where the children have been adopted. Typically these are teenagers and where parents are challenged by their behaviour. The other 9 hubs provide support predominately to foster families.

- 3.4.2 Five of our hubs are set within mainstream fostering and 5 support kinship foster carers. Across the hubs just over 150 children are supported. Mocking Birds Hubs are effective at promoting greater placement stability and carers are more likely to go for long term placements when they are confident they have the support of the hub, resulting in better outcomes for children.
- 3.4.3 Mocking Hubs are also an important factor not only in the retention of foster cares, but also in the recruitment of foster carers. As hubs become more normal and widely adopted, having hubs running in Leeds are an important factor in recruitment. Work is currently under way on hub 11. This is currently delayed as a result of Covid related issues, but we are working on this and hope to bring this hub on line this financial year. The Mocking Bird hubs compliment the support offered to Foster Carers. During Covid support and contact with Foster Carers has continued from their Supervising Social Worker via Skype, call and socially distanced face to face visits, often outside. It's been hard for groups to meet up in person and we've focussed on supporting our carers directly or facilitating contact online

3.5 Lifelong links

- 3.5.1 Leeds has been successful in securing further funding for the Lifelong Links team. Lifelong Links is a service that supports children to learn and understand about their wider family. Through a Family Group Conference the Lifelong Links coordinators help young people come together with family members and other adults. Through participation in this process the child is able to build relationships with adults that are independents of statutory relationships. These relationships may last into adulthood for the child and equip them with a wider network that can offer support as they grow through childhood and into being a young adult.
- 3.5.2 Through extended funding the Lifelong Links service now has more capacity and will be working with our Children Looked After in all placement types, including in Fostering placements.

3.6 Foster Friendly Leeds

- 3.6.1 The Foster Friendly employer's initiative is a national programme promoted by the Fostering Network. Around 40% of Foster Carers nationally work and this initiative enables employers to develop fostering friendly policies for their staff for instance to have time away from work when a child is placed with them. Working with partners in the council we are progressing this initiative so that Leeds City Council can become a Foster Friendly employer. Once achieved this we will begin to work with employers in the City to directly market Foster Care to their staff and support them with bespoke policies.

3.7 Special Guardianship Orders/ Kinship Care

- 3.7.1 Supporting Children to grow up in permanent arrangements with families remains a core goal for children's social work services. Where appropriate, enabling children to be cared for through Special Guardianship Orders can provide significant benefits to the child's sense of belonging and security. Social Workers will continually assess and review children's plans for permanency and consider where appropriate and feasible how Special Guardianship applications can best be supported for children in Kinship and Foster Care arrangements. Our services in Leeds have also been working collaboratively with other authorities in West Yorkshire in an effort to improve

the assessment and support planning arrangements in order to maximise the potential to support children in these arrangements and ensure that all have confidence that these are right for child.

- 3.7.2 We know that in order to provide these types of arrangements for Foster Carers and Kinship Carers those carers need to be assured that the support the authority provides is equivalent to that which they receive as Foster carers and Kinship Carers and that this support remains available on an ongoing basis. We have reviewed the range of support and entitlements available in our Special Guardianship Offer which continues to be amongst the best in the country.
- 3.7.3 Working with colleagues across the West Yorkshire region we have been able to develop a consistent offer for Foster Carers who move to support children via Special Guardianship Orders. This offer ensures that the carer is not at a disadvantage in caring for a child via an SGO.
- 3.7.4 Specifically we are reviewing our existing arrangements to, in some cases, continue to provide financial support to Special Guardianship arrangements where the young person reaches adulthood at 18. We know that for many children growing up in foster care the ability to 'stay put' beyond 18 is often dependent on continuing support, including financial support to the household. Our intention is that where an SGO is in place there is no financial or other disadvantage to the carers.
- 3.7.5 We are working to extend this support for former Foster Carers again to maximise the support and ensure that young adults previously cared for in Special Guardianship arrangements are best equipped to succeed into adulthood.
- 3.7.6 We welcome the recently published parliamentary task force report on Kinship care (First Thought, Not Afterthought). A number of the recommendations contained within the report, for instance those relating to the Benefits System, to legal representation and to Parental Leave, and we support those recommendations.
- 3.7.7 The report goes on to make recommendations that relate to Local Authorities. In Leeds we have a strong offer to our Kinship carers. This includes access to the same range of support and leisure activities. As identified above we also offer Mocking Bird hubs to our Kinship Carers, which is a specific recommendation. The Lifelong Links programme, another recommendation, is available to children and young people who meet the referral criteria and this would include families where Kinship care is provided.
- 3.7.8 The Report recommends specific actions for employers to take to recognise the role of Kinship Carers and asks them to develop policies that anticipate the needs of Kinship Carers. The recommendation in this report regarding Leeds adopting the Foster Friendly Employer standard will also support Kinship Care in this regard.
- 3.7.9 The Report makes a number of other recommendations that deserve a detailed and through evaluation. The Services responsible for Kinship Care will evaluate these recommendations and use them to assess existing services, before making recommendations for further development.

3.8 Foster carer training and development

- 3.8.1 In caring for our children and young people our Foster Carers require a range of skills and knowledge. Our training offer to them is critical in helping them manage difficult situations and care effectively for our children. Developing the skills of our Foster Carers will support them in being able to care for children with more difficult and complex behaviours, reducing our reliance on external placements and improving outcomes for young people.
- 3.8.2 At the pre-approval stage all applicants are required to participate 'Journey to Foster' course provided by Foster Talks. Initially this was planned as a group based course, but since Covid, has become an online course like all our other training. This new offer reflects more current thinking on Fostering. In particular the newer courses pick up themes like trauma, current thinking on working with teenagers and adolescence and developmental delay.
- 3.8.3 The current courses cover a range of topics that includes Core Values and Skills, Working with Adolescents, Understanding Trauma, etc. Prospective carers are also required to attend a selection of taster courses prior to their approval at Fostering Panel. These new courses give prospective carers a better understanding of the role of being a foster carer, introduce some of the issues they may encounter as carers and explains more about the Social care system.
- 3.8.4 A training and development programme is provided for all approved foster carers and is linked to the Payment for Skills (PFS) model. Foster carers are required to attend training or development opportunities dependant on their PFS level. The training framework is reviewed and updated by the foster carer training steering group alongside colleagues from Workforce Development. In the last year 30 different subject areas were covered and over 100 training sessions delivered. A highlight in this year's programme was the piloting of the 'secure base model' training which was attended by over 40 carers.
- 3.8.5 The Secure Base Model programme provides a framework for helping foster carers to understand the thinking and behaviour of the children they care for. The course is practical and focuses on the day to day care children need. Early feedback has been good and eventually all foster carers will participate in Secure Base training which we see as a key learning event for fostering.
- 3.8.6 The Fostering Service maintains a very close working relationship with the Therapeutic Social Work team. They offer training and support groups to foster carers, including the Nurtured Heart programme, which offers strategies for carers in managing complex and challenging behaviours. We are also reviewing the potential to offer courses online. Currently a pilot programme for foster carers is being developed by Workforce Development with 20 different online events. Online topics cover the same areas as off line work and include areas like Safeguarding, CSE, Equality and Diversity, etc. Delivering on line allows us to continue to run our training irrespective of issues like Covid.
- 3.8.7 Our training offer is rooted in the Leeds Practice Model. All Foster Carers are supported to work with restorative approaches and be able to benefit from interventions such as formulation which are already proving very effective in supporting our work on placement stability. Formulation provides an opportunity for all those involved in the care of a child to come together and understand what is driving their behaviour. This enables the participants to begin to think about how they can help the child change their behaviour and agree specific offers of support and

intervention. This helps improve placement stability by ensuring that everyone is working from a common plan and to common goals. Formulation is guided by trained staff who are able to support carers and the team around them.

- 3.8.8 In collaboration with our Foster Carers and Workforce Development we will review our training programme and take into account the impact of and learning from Covid. The Workforce Development team have been able to move training online. This has allowed our training offer to continue. This happened very quickly at the beginning of Covid and has ensured that the flow of training to new and existing carers has continued.
- 3.8.9 We need to ensure that our ambition to offer a wider range of foster placements to children with more complex and challenging behaviours and needs is underpinned by a suitable training programme so that prospective carers are better equipped to understand and manage the behaviour of children who may present in ways that are hard to understand or manage. Developing this offer will help our carers look after children and young people with a broader range of behaviours and will contribute to reducing demand for external residential placements.

3.9 Fostering Panels

- 3.9.1 There are currently four Fostering Panels which meet on a monthly basis. We have three Independent Chairs, an experienced pool of Vice Chairs, Panel Advisors and Independent Panel members. Since March 2020 there has been a significant increase in demand for panel slots, mainly due to an increase in Kinship carers being assessed and we are projecting this will get greater as the increased interest in Fostering, particularly since the Covid lockdown, is reflected in the number of assessments going to Panel.
- 3.9.2 As a result, we have introduced a regular fifth Panel a month during the summer and are in the process of recruiting a fourth independent Panel Chair which will provide the capacity to run a sixth panel per month by January 2021.
- 3.9.3 All Panels complete a quality assurance audit of each item heard. This is then collated and provides evaluation of the reports to panel. Overall, the feedback from the Fostering Panels is positive. Where poor quality reports are identified feedback is given to the author and their manager and improvement actions agreed. 97% of Foster carers rate their experience of Fostering Panel as Very Good (74%) and Good (23%). Of the remaining 3% work is completed to understand this feedback and identify any actions to needed to address areas for development.

3.10 Quality Assurance Information

- 3.10.1 The quality of practice in Fostering is also assessed through regular audits. These are undertaken by Team and Service Delivery Managers each month. Overall these provide reassurance that the current work is assessed as good or outstanding. The service has re-emphasised the role of managerial audit and increased the number being done. In addition to audit work, quality assurance work is undertaken through supervision and through feedback from reviews and Fostering Reviewing Officers. The views of Foster Carers also contribute to our evaluation. Our auditing has proved helpful in raising standards of practice across fostering and continues to be a priority.

3.10.2 Following a service review last year the responsibility for the Fostering Reviewing Officers (FRO) has changed and they are now a part of the Integrated Safeguarding Unit. The FRO's are now aligned with the Independent Reviewing Officers. This allows them to support the service by providing challenge to the service and practitioners from a perspective independent of the Fostering Service. This benefits the service, carers and young people. A fourth FRO has recently been recruited to be provide extra capacity. Managers from the Fostering Service and the IRO service meet on a regular basis to review work and for the service to receive feedback. There is no doubt this has increased the scrutiny of fostering practice and again will contribute to a raising of standards across the Service.

3.11 Diversity of Foster Carers and CLA

3.11.1 86% of our current Foster Carers identify as White British and 14% identify as BAME. These figures largely correlate with that for the general population of Leeds. The two largest groups of BAME foster carers are made up of people who identify as either of Asian Pakistan and Black Caribbean origin, both of which are 2.3% of the total foster carer group.

3.11.2 Within the Fostering group there are some significant differences. Within mainstream fostering only 9% of carers identify as being of BAME origin, but this figure leaps to 19% amongst kinship foster carers. It is also noticeable that BAME carers are more likely to be short term carers (14%) as oppose to long term (9%) and are more likely to be Payment for Skills level 1 or 2 carers (16%) than level 4 carers (8%). This information hasn't been gathered before so there are no comparisons with previous years. However, we intend to continue to collect this data and will develop a programme this year to bring about a situation where our cohort of carers reflects the cohort of foster children.

3.11.3 The Children Looked After cohort has 69% of children who identify as white British and 31% who identify as BAME. Amongst 16 & 17 year olds this over representation is even greater with 45% and 41% respectively identifying as BAME.

3.11.4 As a service there is a need to ensure that the profile of our foster carers reflects that of the children they look after. Our recruitment work will continue to focus on achieving a closer match.

3.12 Response to Covid

3.12.1 Although the Covid lockdown came at the end of the reporting period it feels inappropriate not to comment on how the Fostering Service has responded to these quite exceptional circumstances.

3.12.2 Overall Foster placements were more stable. Fostering households described a strengthening of relationships with children content and stable in their homes. Foster carers supported young people in maintaining their home schooling and in developing new home based activities to do together. There were difficult situations but again foster carers worked with challenging behaviours and supported young people. Foster Carers worked to support young people in maintaining the stability of placements. Foster Carers were supported virtually through their Mocking Bird hubs and Foster Carers were also able to draw on support from their Supervising Social Workers and from other partners.

- 3.12.3 Our normal way of supporting foster carers, through home visits, needed to change and we saw that Social Workers embraced this and in many situations contact levels with Foster Carers actually increased with weekly phone calls or SKYPE calls being used much more. Supervising Social Workers were supported with clear guidance about how to respond during the pandemic. Staff were able to maintain the quality of relationships with Foster Carers, and to enhance and grow those relationships in many cases, whilst ensuring that our practice remained aligned with statutory expectations.
- 3.12.4 The Leeds Foster Care Association played a key role in offering practical support such as food deliveries and Fostering managers showed appropriate discretion in approving additional payments where appropriate to foster carers experiencing financial hardship. Some of our Foster Carers and children were in shielding categories and so we needed to work to support them in particular. We were able to provide additional assistance to families in shielding categories. This support was varied and included liaising with local supermarkets to ensure we could get nappies through to working with more typical partners, for instance in helping provide learning materials for children who were not attending school.

3.13 Strategic Issues and Future Priorities

- 3.13.1 The key challenge for the Fostering Service is to recruit additional carers to support a greater number of children being cared for in Leeds whilst ensuring that the standard of care for children remains high and their outcomes align with our aspirations for them. As outlined earlier in the report; we are confident of being able to achieve this due to a significant increase in interest in fostering in recent months.
- 3.13.2 In the current financial year (2020) we have brought greater focus on placements where we fear there is a risk of break down and we recognise that we need to extend this work and bring in supportive interventions much sooner. Building on the work of our Mocking Bird hubs we have developed and improved our offer of enrichment to Foster families. In partnership with Child Friendly Leeds we have a number of opportunities; but we need to extend this further.
- 3.13.3 Building the resilience of our Children Looked After is critical in their development. In particular, ensuring they have a wide network of adults committed to helping and supporting them. This year we have worked with the Lifelong Links programme to map and understand children's wider family and we will continue this. We will also begin to develop a strategy helping young people develop relationships with supportive adults outside their immediate care.
- 3.13.4 Our current External Residential cohort of young people has some smaller groups within it, for instance children of similar ages, backgrounds or needs. We will continue to analyse these cohorts this year and devise specific fostering models for them. This analysis will support our training offer and recruitment strategy. Our intention is to devise a specific fostering offer for these children that will enable them to be offered an alternative to residential care. This, in turn will allow us to reduce directly the numbers of children in external care and also the flow for children to external care.
- 3.13.5 Our work in developing our fostering provision sits in the context of the broader duty on the Local Authority to have sufficient provision for the children it needs to

accommodate. A clear priority for the wider Corporate Parenting service will be to lead with colleagues in Children's commissioning a refresh of the current sufficiency strategy. This will help us to analyse our longer term placement needs and will be completed in 2021.

3.14 Priorities for the year ahead

3.14.1 The year 2020/21 has been more challenging than would have been expected and the service has a number of priorities. These are;

- To increase the number of foster carers available to the service and to reduce the use of Independent Fostering Agencies and residential placements
- To develop different strands of foster carer offer, in particular
 - Support for children of primary school age with complex behaviour
 - Short term support to children and their families where the family is imminently unable to care for their children
 - Support for teenagers with challenging behaviour
- To review our Payment for Skills model to support the development of a wider offer and reduce our use of residential placements
- To increase the number of foster carers who identify as being BAME so that the percentage of our foster carer cohort is similar to that of the young people we work with
- To increase the number of foster carers available to support Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.
- To continue developing our enrichment offer to foster families to ensure Leeds remains the best possible place to be a foster carer and to support our ambition to be a child friendly city
- To maintain our scrutiny of external placements and ensure that we only place children in external placements when necessary (i.e. that we are not able to support reunification or placement in Leeds) and that when placed, outcomes are good.
- To conclude our work setting out an enhanced offer to SGO carers
- Extend the use of formulation and early help support services to foster families
- To achieve Foster Friendly Employer status for Leeds City Council.

4 Corporate considerations

4.1 Consultation and engagement

4.1.1 Foster carers meet bi-monthly with officers and councillors via the Foster Carer Liaison Group (FCLG) to discuss areas of service development and any issues of concern. Foster carer representation and stakeholder involvement in new service developments remains a key principle of the service.

4.1.2 The Leeds Foster Care Association (LFCA) is an independent organisation, a registered charity with its own constitution. On occasions it rightly provides a challenge to the Fostering Service and can be viewed as a critical friend. However, it also provides advice and support to foster carers in their role working with Children Looked After. Particularly in respect of the out of hours' service it provides, it has recently been recognised that the fostering service needs to provide a more formal structured support offer to the members of the LFCA providing guidance to other

foster carers. This arrangement is now in place with a Fostering Team Manager providing regular supervision to carers involved in the out of hours support service.

- 4.1.3 The work of the Fostering Service is overseen through the Corporate Parenting Board. The Board has representation from services, partner agencies and from Elected Members and provides oversight of the work of the Fostering Service.

4.2 Equality and diversity / cohesion and integration

- 4.2.1 The Fostering Service Equality Impact Assessment previously completed remains relevant. This report contains a number of actions and recommendations that will improve the services work in ensuring a cohort of carers reflective of the cohort of children we care for.

4.3 Council policies and the Best Council Plan

- 4.3.1 The Children and young people plan identifies children who are looked after as one of the three priority 'Obsessions.'

Climate Emergency

- 4.3.2 The recommendations in this report will support greater care of children from Leeds in Leeds. This will reduce the number of children placed elsewhere and will reduce potential impact on climate through transport.

4.4 Resources, procurement and value for money

- 4.4.1 The offer of Foster Care placements continues to provide a good use of resources. Foster placements are not only less costly than other types of offer, but offer better outcomes representing better value for money.
- 4.4.2 Government funding does not cover the costs of maintaining and developing the successful Leeds Staying Put offer so this has to be factored in to our continuing commitments.

4.5 Legal implications, access to information, and call-in

- 4.5.1 This report is subject to call-in.

4.6 Risk management

- 4.6.1 It is a regulatory requirement of the local authority that this report is prepared and presented to the Executive Board of the Council. The report is linked to the corporate risk on Safeguarding Children.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 The recruitment and retention of foster carers and the development priorities of the fostering service will continue to be addressed in order to achieve a high quality service and best outcomes for children and young people looked after.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 That the Executive Board receives this report and continues to support the work of the Fostering Service and promote best outcomes for children.
- 6.2 That the Executive Board support the following specific recommendations;
- To increase the number of current foster care placements available to children and young people cared for by Leeds and to reduce the use of external residential and Independent Fostering Agency placements for children cared for by Leeds.
 - To develop the offer, in partnership with Child Friendly Leeds, of additional activities and enrichment for fostering families.
 - To increase the diversity of our foster carers so that it matches that of the communities we serve and the children we care for.
 - To increase our ability to meet a wide range of children's complex needs by developing a broader service offer underpinned by an enhanced training programme.
 - To continue with our work with colleagues in West Yorkshire to improve and enhance the offer for Foster Carers taking on Special Guardianship Orders.
 - For Leeds City Council to achieve 'Foster Friendly Employer' status.
 - Note that the officer responsible for the implementation is the Deputy Head of Service, Corporate Parenting.

7 Background documents¹

- 7.1 None

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.