

## Leeds City Council Fostering Service: Annual Fostering Report, April 2020 to March 2021

### Background

This report provides an overview of the work of Leeds City Council Fostering Service during the financial year April 2020 to March 2021. The report provides information on our work in recruiting new foster carers, our support to our existing carers and updates on our work with Kinship carers.

The last 12 months have been an unprecedented period as we have worked to support our young people and carers during the pandemic. Our report provides information about the support we have offered. We also provide an update on our progress against 2020/21's objectives and propose new ones for the forthcoming year (2021/22).

Leeds City Council operates one of the largest fostering services of any local authority in the country. The last several years have seen an increase in the number of children coming into care across the UK, the table below shows how in Leeds this figure has remained broadly consistent. In Leeds most of our children looked after (around 63%) are accommodated with our Foster Carers.

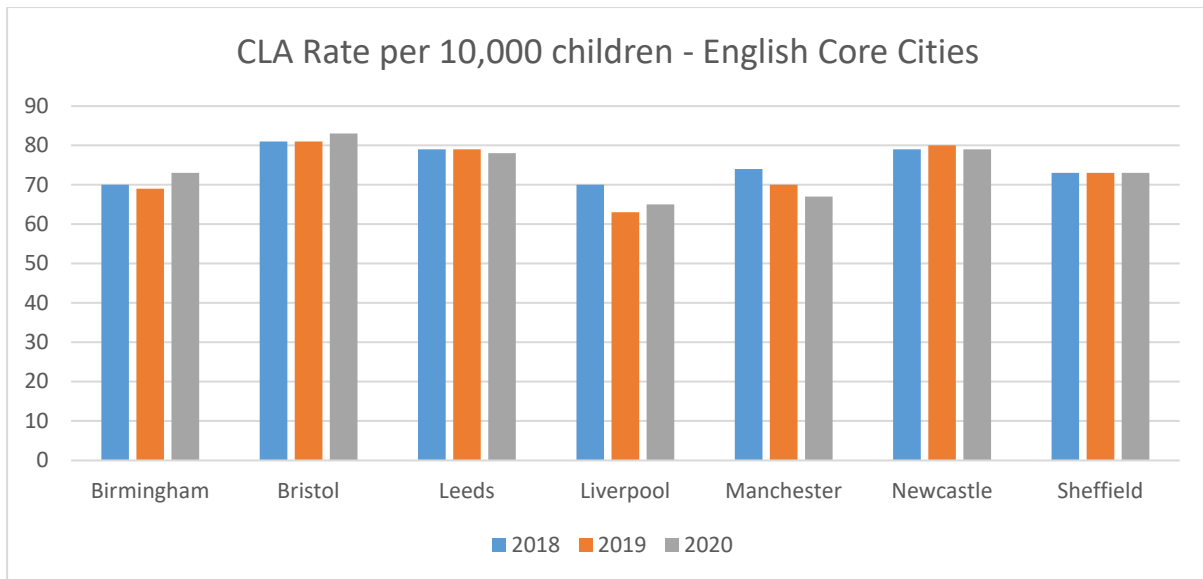
### Children Looked After

At the end of the 2020/21 year Leeds looked after 1278 children. The following table provides a breakdown of the children looked after, by age group, and as a rate per 10,000.

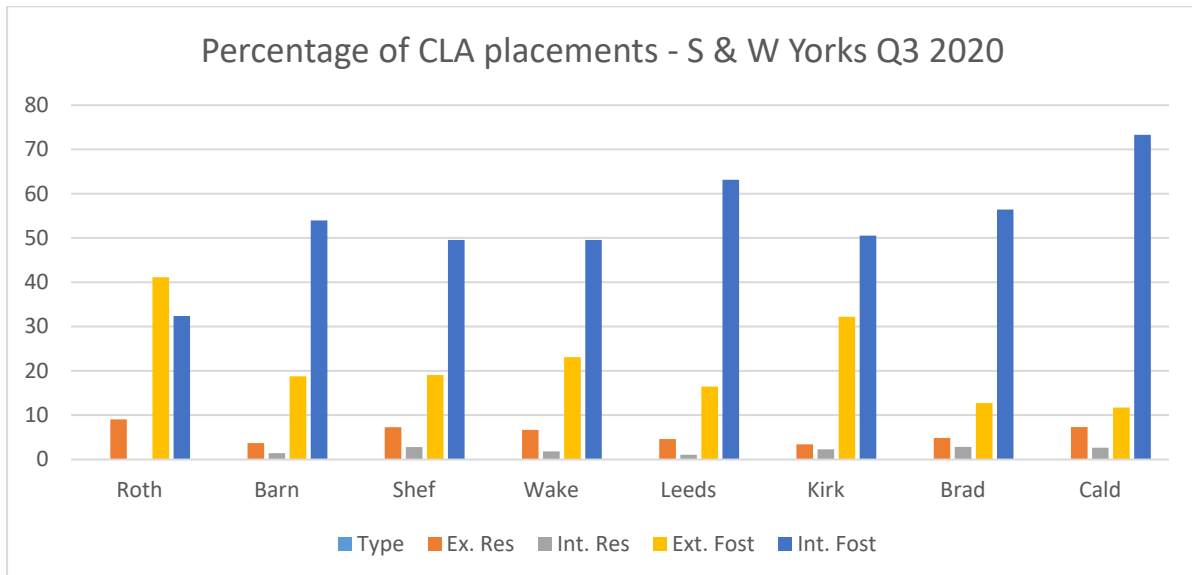
Period	Age range					Total	Rate per 10,000 children
	<1 year	1-4 years	5-9 years	10-15 years	16 and 17 years		
2016/17	71	156	261	519	246	1253	76
2017/18	81	172	256	529	229	1267	76
2018/19	67	205	245	510	259	1286	77
2019/20	69	214	256	522	285	1346	79
2020/21	52	201	252	498	275	1278	75

Our largest cohorts of children looked after by age range in 20/21 are our teenagers, with our children 15, 16 and 17 the largest group amongst those we work with.

As a city, Leeds has a high percentage of children looked after in foster care and a higher level of usage of foster care than most English core cities.



The following graph shows how the authorities across West and South Yorkshire placed their children at the end of quarter 3 (Dec 20) in the year 2020/21. The figures are a percentage of the overall cohort of CLA in the placement type. Note – Information for Doncaster was not available.



Within South and West Yorkshire, at the end of quarter 3, we had a higher percentage of our children looked after placed in our fostering provision than almost all other authorities (only Calderdale had higher). Our use of external residential was lower as a percentage of our overall children placed than everyone except Barnsley and Kirklees and our use of external fostering providers was lower than all but two other authorities in our region (Bradford and Calderdale).

### Impact of COVID-19

COVID has had a significant impact on the services offered to children living with foster carers and on the service offered to foster carers. During the lockdowns through 2020/21 we have had to suspend most face to face contact and pause some of the support and assistance activities that we would normally run in person. Contact with carers for a lot of the year moved online and was undertaken via Skype or other communication apps.

With carer support and engagement we have been able to run most of carer support groups online. We are currently exploring how we bring back face to face support where it is needed most.

Where possible we have used internet enabled technologies to maintain visual contact during our work and to support carers and children. Carers have helped children maintain family time with their birth families. Foster Carers have worked to support family time in parks or open air venues when lockdown rules have permitted. We have also worked to use Skype, Teams and other apps to support links between children looked after and their birth families. We have worked to make sure that contact between children and their birth family has been maintained and kept as frequent and regular as before lockdown.

The children placed with foster carers have been able to access their education physically throughout the lockdowns and carers have supported this. Where circumstances have prevented this, carers have supported our children to access their education online.

COVID has made our work more challenging, but with the support of our carers and colleagues, we have been able to maintain children's placements with foster families. COVID has delayed some of our service development activities and these are covered in the sections below. The need to prioritise support for carers and our children has meant that some of the service development activities we had planned have been delayed or paused during the last year, these are back on track now and will be progressed during the next 12 months.

## **Staffing**

A number of staff within the service have left during the year, including some under the council's Early Leavers Initiative. Others have retired from service or have moved onto new roles. We have appointed an interim service delivery manager for the service. We have also begun a recruitment exercise to fill some of the vacancies that have come about through retirement.

## **Foster Carer Recruitment**

This year we saw an increase of around 20% in the numbers of people expressing an interest in becoming a foster carer. Of those that expressed an interest we saw a higher conversion rate to assessments with 20% increase in the conversion rate. We were able to recruit and register 35 new foster carers within our mainstream provision, 10 new foster carers for children with complex needs, 89 new kinship carers and 10 new rent a room providers for our older young people. However, during the same year we have also seen nearly as many carers retire or move on from fostering and so our net growth has been low. The numbers leaving our fostering service is not unusual

and reflects people retiring, taking on Special Guardianship Orders for children placed with them as Foster Care or feeling that they wish to take on new challenges. The table below provides more detail.

Carer Type	New households registered	Households deregistered	Net change in households
Kinship	89	59	30
Mainstream	35	31	4
Complex needs	10	9	1
Rent-a-room	32	22	10
Total	166	121	45

The service has 511 mainstream and 302 kinship foster carers.

The ethnicity of our carers is shown below.

Carer Ethnicity	All carers %age of total	Mainstream carer %age of total	Kinship carer %age by ethnicity	% CLA by ethnicity
White Background	87.5	86.9	86.4	71.65
African/ Caribbean background	6.62	7.13	6.4	6.20
Asian background	2.85	4.27	2.2	3.10
Mixed heritage	1.70	0.94	3.6	15.5

(Note that some fostering households have 2 carers).

We clearly have a higher number of carers from a white background than we have children in our cohort of children looked after. We also see a higher number of children who are recorded as having a mixed heritage than carers who record their ethnicity in a similar way.

We have an active programme working with the Muslim community and have recently renewed our contract with that provider. We are in the process of recruiting to posts within our recruitment team. Through increasing the number of staff involved in recruitment we hope to be able to build better relationships with our communities and increase the number of carers we can recruit.

Our recruitment strategy is centred on our core proposition – that we are the Leeds Fostering Service for Leeds children working with Leeds Foster Carers. Our approach specifically emphasises working within local communities by asking our recruitment

advisers to get to know a local area and its community and community groups and structures and build relationships and networks.

By encouraging our recruiters to be closely aligned with a particular part of the city we hope to be able to build relationships with networks, community groups and partnerships and, through these, to encourage wider involvement of BAME foster carers.

## **Marketing**

An important part of our recruitment approach is our marketing strategy. The Fostering Service has been very well supported by colleagues within the Marketing and Communications Team. We have developed promotional literature and visual media that are attached at the end of this report.

The 'Foster4Leeds' brand on Twitter and Facebook continues to be marketed and has a number of followers. We'd encourage everyone to follow and retweet the 'Foster4Leeds' twitter account at @LdsFosteringAdv .

## **Training**

At the beginning of the lockdown the training team moved the training provision online where courses could be delivered this way. This offer expanded throughout the year and more foster carers have been able to access a wider range of training provision as the year has moved on.

The curriculum offer for carers has increased during the year. Carers have been able to maintain their core training offer and the 'payment for skills' training requirements and this has been supplemented with additional courses. Carers have been invited to join 'masterclasses' alongside other members of social care.

Each month, within Children's Social Work Services, we have a practice theme. The theme informs part of the months training offer and we support staff with access to online resources, reading and webinars. We have recently begun to include foster carers in each month's theme and enabled them to have access to the webinars and other materials.

The fostering surgeries continued during lockdown as well with carers able to book and attend time to discuss challenges they were experiencing in the care of their children. Fostering surgeries, where we are able to offer specialist advice from our Therapeutic Team, were available throughout the year for carers.

Support to newly approved carers has been provided via webinars and on line provision. New carers have also had access to AC Education website which provides a range of training courses and reading material. Existing carers are able to access the Research in Practice website which provides the same level of access as our social workers have and offers a wide range of resources in working with children and young people.

The last year has been challenging for the training team and they have responded well by maintaining an offer and moving as much of the training on line as possible. We know from feedback that some carers have welcomed the ability to access training from their front room and haven't missed courses in person. However, we know that

there are other carers for whom the reverse is true and the Training Team is working on a blended approach to training once we are able to have some carers in classrooms again.

### **Enrichment activities**

During a typical year we usually aim to offer at least 3-4 events per week during the school holidays, both from within our own youth service and using externally sourced provision. COVID has significantly affected what we can offer. Prior to COVID this could be museums, recycling centres, fire stations, seaside coach trips and so much more. We also typically run 5-6 residential trips a year for ages 8-17yrs. Our holiday lodge was also unavailable for almost the whole year due to Covid, but has begun to operate again after Easter 2021.

During the pandemic everything we had planned had to be cancelled and rearranged. What we were able still to do was keep our activities going with youth services at Herd Farm and West Leeds Activity centre for most of the lockdowns. Our focus was on supporting placements during this difficult time, so all the dates we had booked for our residential visits were still utilised but without the sleepovers so each residential became 3 full days, rather than overnights, so 36 children benefitted each time.

These activities were popular as they offered a much needed break for carers and so more dates were booked in. It became evident that we were seeing a lot of the same young people being put forward because they were from placements where the need was greatest. We were conscious we were offering the same type of days over and over so we adapted the days. As well as running the typical activities days we did age appropriate theme days over the Christmas period such as foraging and Arts and Crafts for the younger children and mountain bike trails for the teenagers. Approximately 220 children benefitted in 2020/21 from these days.

In January 2021 all enrichment events were stopped, due to further COVID restrictions, and we were unable to bring groups of young people together, even with social distancing and bubbles in place. To get things going again during March 2021 the enrichment team decided to run activity days for individual family bubbles so as to maintain Covid compliance. We ran these during weekends to give the opportunity for both carers within the family to attend. We had 3 families per day doing a round robin of activities. This offered not only the opportunity to do something outside the family home but was great for family relations, these families were put forward by their Supervising Social Workers as ones that would benefit the most. A total of 20 families attended throughout March. Feedback from this was good and this is an approach we will repeat and we have more dates booked in for later in the year.

During the Easter holidays we ran 6 activity days at West Leeds Activity Centre for children aged 8 to 17. In May we ran a Forest Sensory group for carers and their under 5's and, we hope that, this will become a monthly group. In June we had a canoeing day and 2 Mountain bike trails for the teens. We are hopeful that, COVID permitting, we can go ahead with our usual much needed 3 night residential trips at Herd Farm - everything is booked and ready.

We currently run a motorcycle and maintenance 6 week course which is accredited with Level 1 & 2 of the Leeds award we are exploring ways of extending this to other activities.

### **Support groups for foster carers**

From March 2019 to March 2020 we continued to run 18 'face to face' support groups across the city including specialist support groups on a monthly or bi-monthly basis; kinship, foster carers who care for teenagers, foster carers who support unaccompanied asylum seeking children, parent and child foster carers, BME foster carers, Asian foster carers, foster carers who care for babies with neonatal abstinence syndrome and carers who care for children with disabilities.

Since March 2020 we have run 14 online support groups for foster carers on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. In addition to this we have continued to run the 'Moving On' Forum three times per year (which was classroom based between March 2019 and March 2020 and has been run online since). This is a forum for those foster carers who are moving children on from their care; kinship care, adoption, long term fostering for example and is co-facilitated by an experienced adopter, foster carers, supervising social worker and adoption social worker.

The Leeds Foster Carer Association facilitates three 'All Carers' support groups over the year, some virtually, which has a training element as well as support.

Each support group has a representative who alongside the Leeds Foster Carers Association (LFCA) attend the Foster Carer Liaison Group which meets bi-monthly. Foster carer representatives play a key stakeholder role and are involved in a range of service developments, although this year, this has been virtual.

### **Foster Friendly Leeds**

In last year's report we discussed our ambition for Leeds City Council to achieve Foster Friendly Employer status. Due to the pressures and challenges of COVID we have not been able to make progress with this as quickly as we would like and have not achieved this status yet. However, we anticipate, following support from Human Resources, being in a position to submit our case for Foster Friendly Employer status to The Fostering Network, in July 2021.

### **Kinship/ SGO Update**

In August 2020, the kinship service moved from fostering to Early Help Services. The purpose of this move was to align Kinship Care more closely with the Family Group Conferencing service to support the identification of extended family at the earliest opportunity. The move to Early Help increases the potential for family members to access non statutory support in order to implement their own plans and successfully care for their children without the need for statutory intervention where this is appropriate and safe.

There continues to be a recognition that there are a number of children who, for a variety of complex reasons, will remain within their kinship placements under the auspices of a Care Order. As such the Kinship Care team continue to have a close

relationship with the Fostering services to ensure that such placements remain in line with statutory requirements.

Children's Social Work Services remain committed to supporting children to grow up in permanent arrangements with their family and this is reflected in our higher than average number of children placed within kinship placements. This includes arrangements, where appropriate, for children to cease being Looked After and become subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO). Leeds have continued to work in partnership with other Local Authorities within the West Yorkshire region to ensure that Kinship and Foster carers who wish to progress to Special Guardianship status are able to access consistent assessment and support arrangements that they feel meet their own needs, those of their children and their birth parents throughout the course of their caring journey.

Jointly with colleagues across West Yorkshire 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, and a new revised offer is expected to be implemented within Leeds by October 2021. This offer ensures that the carer is not at a disadvantage in caring for a child via a Special Guardianship Order.

We recognise that the main challenges to Carers feeling able to progress to Special Guardianship arrangements are often linked to how they will access therapeutic support for their children and facilitate family time arrangements which are complex or high risk. The revised offer allows for additional support to carers to maximise support available through the Adoption Support Fund and to consider alternative avenues of therapeutic input for children. Plans are being made to provide support around family time where it has been assessed as detrimental or risky to the placement for this to be facilitated by the carers post SGO.

The Life Long Links service, which supports children to build their extended family network, has recently expanded to include an offer to care leavers and those children who have been in care for longer than 3 years. We continue to work with Family Rights Group around service delivery of both Life Long Links and Family Group Conferencing (FGC), with FGC recently becoming an accredited service.

We are working closely with One Adoption and Kinship (formerly Grandparents Plus) towards implementing the specific recommendations which were made within the parliamentary task force for kinship care published last year; this includes Leeds as a Foster Friendly Employer including kinship carers. Kinship Carers continue to be able to access support from The Mockingbird Hubs and Kinship Carers support groups and we have now re-coordinated the Kinship Carers voice and influence group who we hope will be an integral part of shaping the kinship service moving forward.

### **Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care**

Parliamentary Taskforce on Kinship Care published a report in September 2020 called 'First thought not afterthought' into the use of kinship care as an approach to caring for children. The report made a number of recommendations, many of which are already practice in Leeds.



- Exploring family as the first port of call – this is a core part of our approach in Leeds and we are focussed on supporting families to care for their children wherever safely possible
- Work and family life – we are imminently introducing HR policies which reflect the role of kinship and mainstream foster carers and are encouraging other employers in the region to do so as well
- The right help at the right time – our services to Kinship families already offer therapeutic and counselling support. We facilitate and support Kinship families in accessing the Adoption Support Fund. Our Mockingbird hubs also support kinship families.

Overall Leeds does well in support our Kinship families and we recognise them as central to the lives of the children we work for.

### **Mockingbird Family Model**

The Mockingbird Family Model (MFM) places an emphasis on building links between fostering families and the wider community. The emphasis is very much about strengthening families and protecting children and young people. The model is evidencing effective support for satellite carers and assisting with placement stability for children and young people. This has been really evident over the last year when we have fostered within a worldwide pandemic and where opportunities for face to face relationships were minimal and strong connections had to adapt in terms of continuing to offer a high level of support. Mockingbird connections stayed strong.

In total, 80 fostering households are being supported with a total of 132 children and young people (this is within 11 hubs).

The Hub foster carer role is central to the establishment of a community network for up to 10 fostering families. Recruiting experienced foster carers has been key to the successful implementation of the model in Leeds. We have increased the number of hubs available to our foster carers to 11 this year; 5 support kinship families (including families who have obtained Special Guardianship Orders) and 5 geographical hubs support mainstream fostering families (including some adoptive families). Hub 11 is due to develop this year. Our commitment to Mockingbird is strong and our development will be needs led – ensuring as a service that we have the right hub carers, the right liaison workers and full service support.

There is a fidelity to the model which is essential to uphold, however, the model is able to be used creatively to meet the needs of the overall service as this changes. Our ambition is for hubs to further develop links to our residential homes aiming to assist young people moving from a residential to a fostering arrangement. Part of this would include providing young people with quality time in a family/community setting until the right long term family can be identified. We would also want to involve young people who are placed out of area where the plan is to return them to their Leeds community.

Mockingbird Family Model staff and foster carers have hosted practice development sessions on the model for other agencies seeking to adopt the model. Leeds continues to have an open doors policy to assist other local authorities who have come on board since 2017 to adopt the model.

MFM staff continue to benefit from working in partnership with The Fostering Network who facilitate national and regional leadership and operational workshops for staff and carers involved in the Mockingbird Family Model. This is alongside national engagement activities for children and young people involved in Mockingbird (known as NEST events).

### **Fostering Panels**

During the year, two of our three Fostering Panel Chairs have moved on. However, we have been able to maintain a high rate of panels with 5 panels running most months during the year. COVID has necessitated these to be run on line and this has created challenges as the service and panel have become used to working with SKYPE initially and then subsequently Zoom or Teams. The panels have run well after getting used to meeting online.

To ensure we have sufficient panel chairs an additional chair was appointed this year and we have recently undertaken a recruitment for new chairs. This has resulted in the appointment of three more panel chairs who chair five panels each month. This will allow us to have more resilience in the pool of chairs and will support the service to manage increased demand for panels.

## 2020 Service Priorities

Overall we have made progress against our objectives in 2020/21

Recommendation	Update
<p>To increase the number of foster carers available to the service and to reduce the use of Independent Fostering Agencies and residential placements</p>	<p>Overall we have increased the number of our own foster placements by 5% and have reduced our use of IFA placements by around 2%.</p> <p>For 2021 we have fully costed and resourced plans to increase our recruitment and assessment capacity and, subject to recruitment, we will grow the capacity of our recruitment service team which will increase the number of foster carers we can attract.</p>
<p>To develop different strands of foster carer offer, in particular</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for children of primary school age with complex behaviour</li> <li>• Short term support to children and their families where the family is imminently unable to care for their children</li> <li>• Support for teenagers with challenging behaviour</li> </ul>	<p>We have worked to address these objectives, but staffing changes and operational pressures from COVID have prevented us making as much progress in this area as we want. This remains part of our ongoing objectives.</p> <p>For 2021 this work continues and, aligned with the review of the 'Payment for Skills' model, we are developing new models of foster care to respond to the needs of teenagers, for short notice care and for younger children with complex needs</p>
<p>To review our Payment for Skills model to support the development of a wider offer and reduce our use of residential placements</p>	<p>We have not been able to make forward progress against this objective due to the impact of COVID and changes within the staff of the service.</p> <p>For 2021 this complex piece of work will continue alongside a review of our models of foster care.</p>
<p>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</p>	<p>The number of foster carers matches better the cohort of children we care for, but we recognise the need to continue to work on this and to ensure that the carer representation across all fee levels is consistent. We are developing a detailed plan to</p>

	support carer progression and we continue to work on recruitment of people from BAME backgrounds
To increase the number of foster carers available to support Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.	We have slightly increased the number of foster placements available to UAS Children, by 5%. For 2021 this will continue as part of our broader programme to recruit more foster carers.
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	Our enrichment offer has been maintained (within COVID restrictions) this year, but, inevitably has not been as varied. We will continue to develop this area as part of core work.
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.	We have continued to review our use of external residential placements, introduced new processes to support staff in developing family based care options and strengthened the governance around their use. At the end of the year 2020/21 External Placements were slightly lower than they had been in 2019/20 by 4%
To conclude our work setting out an enhanced offer to SGO carers	This work has progressed with an offer now developed and in the process of being implemented. The formal launch is scheduled for October 2021
Extend the use of formulation and early help support services to foster families	The impact of COVID has prevented us in developing the use of formulation as much we would have liked. Support for Kinship families has been extended from Early Help services.
To achieve Foster Friendly Employer status for Leeds City Council	This has been delayed due to COVID, but we are close to having agreed this and anticipate that we will be ready to submit our application by June 2021 to the Fostering Network.

## **2021 Service Priorities**

We remain ambitious to increase the proportion of children in foster care and cared for in our own fostering provision and to develop the strength and resilience of our foster carers. Our recommendations for service priorities are as follows;

- To increase the number of newly recruited Foster Carers
- To increase the number of Foster Carers recruited who have BAME backgrounds
- To achieve Foster Friendly Employer status
- To continue to grow our enrichment offer for Foster Carers.
- To formally launch our offer for Kinship and Special Guardianship carers

## **Conclusion**

Overall the service has performed well during a difficult year. Overall stability for our young people has remained good.

## **Recommendation**

That the Executive Board accepts the services assessment of its performance during 2020/21 and the services priorities for 2021/22.