

**REPORT TO: POLICY AND PERFORMANCE REVIEW
COMMITTEE (PPRC)**

MEETING DATE: 15th June 2023

BY: Lindsey Byrne, Head of Children's Services

SUBJECT: Fostering Update



1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide committee with an update on fostering in East Lothian, including development work focussed on our approach to payments and support to ensure we are able to retain our current cohort of carers while attracting new people to choose fostering as a career.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The committee is asked to note the current position of foster care in East Lothian and the particular challenges in recruitment. It is also invited to note the planned developments required to review payments and models of support.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Under Section 22 of The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009, East Lothian Council operates as a fostering agency. This requires the council to appoint a fostering panel which has a statutory responsibility to consider and review the case of every foster carer and prospective foster carer referred to it by the local authority.
- 3.2 The fostering panel, amongst other decisions, must make a recommendation about whether a prospective foster carer is suitable, or continues to be suitable to be a foster carer.
- 3.3 When someone is approved as a foster carer for East Lothian Council, they are allocated to a social worker who specialises in the field of fostering. This social worker acts as the carer's supervisor, providing regular support and oversight whilst getting to know the children who are placed with the carer.
- 3.4 The East Lothian fostering team provide a high level of support for carers. They build close working relationships to ensure they understand their individual needs. Carers are offered a wide range of regular training and development opportunities including Team Teach (positive behaviour

management) and emotional regulation. There are frequent local support groups. Foster carers, supported by a facilitator, come together to provide peer support amongst people who understand the challenges and opportunities that come with caring for children and young people. There is also a peer mentoring initiative where more experienced carers pair up with newly approved carers to provide advice and guidance at the start of their fostering journeys.

- 3.5 In May 2023, East Lothian has 49 full-time foster carers and four respite foster carers. This equates to 83 full-time and six respite placements for children and young people. Two foster carers are waiting to be deregistered and are no longer looking after children. Thirty of the foster carers are approved to have two children if they are siblings.
- 3.6 Thirteen foster carers are providing continuing care which means that a young person is choosing to remain in the placement once they have ceased to be officially looked after. While this is a good indicator of placement stability and a child-centred approach to care, it also means that these placements are not available for new children requiring foster care.
- 3.7 The current age range of our carers shows that a significant majority of them are over 50 years old. There are 23 foster carers over the age of 61 and four over the age of 70. While there is no set age for foster carer retirement, we can reasonably expect the current cohort to reduce over the next five years. There is currently one family in the assessment phase and due to come to panel for approval in July 2023.
- 3.8 The number of new foster carers being recruited in East Lothian has reduced over the past five years:

| Year | Fostering inquiries | New carers approved | Carers deregistered |
|--------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 2018 | 29 | 4 | 3 |
| 2019 | 62 | 4 | 9 |
| 2020 | 32 | 9 * | 1 |
| 2021 | 28 | 5 | 4 |
| 2022 | 29 | 4 | 6 |
| 2023 to date | 18 | 0 | 4 |

*5 carers recruited under emergency COVID-19 regulations – only 2 of them are still fostering

- 3.9 East Lothian is in line with a national fostering recruitment crisis as a number of local authorities report a similar decline in foster care recruitment. However, it is known that people who reside in East Lothian have been recruited by City of Edinburgh Council and independent fostering agencies. City of Edinburgh have a significant marketing budget

and will often advertise within East Lothian. It is also understood that independent agencies advertise their ability to provide 24/7 support to carers which is attractive.

- 3.10 It is acknowledged that there are currently not enough East Lothian Council foster carers to meet the demand of children who require foster placements. Given that there are insufficient carers in East Lothian, Children's Services are required to also use independent fostering agencies at a significant additional cost to the local authority. This can result in children having to reside out with East Lothian which can cause further disruption and lead to poorer outcomes in the longer term.
- 3.11 Increasing the cohort of East Lothian Council foster carers would lead to cost savings over time as there would still be a number of children in external foster care. It may not be in their best interests to move back to East Lothian. As external placements are phased out over time, the cost of internal fostering would increase. It is not possible to quantify the saving and the timings as there are many variables, mostly out with the control of East Lothian Council.
- 3.12 Children's Services are actively considering how to attract more local people to consider fostering as a career. Further work is now required with foster care payments and support opportunities out with office hours.
- 3.13 Foster carers receive two payments, known as the fee and the allowance. The fee is effectively their wage and the allowance is the money to be used to provide for the child in placement.
- 3.14 The Scottish Government have been reviewing the fostering allowance with a view to setting a national minimum. However, this has not yet been possible due to the vast difference in payment levels across Scotland.
- 3.15 East Lothian Council operates two systems for carers' fees. The older system is one with three levels where carers entered at level one and progressed to level two and three as their experience and training progressed. The newer system bases the payment on the age of the child with one payment being offered for children aged 0-11 and a higher payment for children aged 12 and over. This was implemented in 2017 to attract more people to care for teenagers but unfortunately this did not lead to an increase in carers for the older age group. Having two payment systems leads to some carers being paid differently.
- 3.16 Having benchmarked East Lothian foster carer payments, we have noted that our fees are less than our neighbouring authorities:

Age related weekly fostering fees by local authority (as at January 2023)

| Local Authority | 0-11 | 12 and over | Disability or specialist |
|---------------------------|-------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| West Lothian Council | £208.15 | £208.15 | N/A |
| City of Edinburgh Council | £171.67 | £234.79 | £429.20 |
| East Lothian Council | £160 | £220 | N/A |

Level related weekly fostering fees by local authority (as at January 2023)

| Local Authority | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
|--------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Scottish Borders Council | £173.16 | £230.93 | N/A |
| Midlothian Council | £231 | £292 | £343 |
| East Lothian Council | £151.50 | £202 | £303 |

- 3.17 Work is now underway across Children's Services and Finance Services to jointly review the fostering payments with a view to bringing an updated model and review of payment fees to Council for approval later this year.
- 3.18 As well as reviewing payments, Children's Services are reconsidering how carers can access support out with normal office hours. Evenings and weekends can be particularly difficult times for children and young people and a local service which can offer advice, guidance or support at these times would bring East Lothian Council in line with independent fostering agencies who offer this as standard.
- 3.19 We also plan to review the approach to marketing with a view to expanding the reach across East Lothian. Children's services continue to work closely with communications colleagues to diversify the approach and to learn from what works in other areas. A new campaign in partnership with Greatest Hits radio is currently being explored.
- 3.20 Since the pandemic and the additional pressures this placed on children and young people, there has been an increase in the distressed behaviour of those children who require foster care. It is important that East Lothian Council responds and commits to modernising the approach to payments and support for carers. It is hoped that this will improve the attractiveness of fostering as a career for local people who have the skills and dedication to make a significant difference to the most vulnerable children and young people.

4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 A review of fostering payments will require the current policy to be updated to reflect the new rates when agreed.
- 4.2 The developments discussed are in line with national policy, outcomes and strategic direction.

5 INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 The subject of this report will go through the Integrated Impact Assessment process when the development work is progressed.

6 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Financial – Children’s Services are working collaboratively with Financial Services to propose a new foster payment structure. The full financial modelling, projected costs and budget implications will be presented to Council for approval in due course.
- 6.2 Personnel - In reviewing and developing the approach to out of hours support for carers, we will take account of any HR related implications. This will be fully outlined in the final report and recommendation to Council.

7 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1 Not applicable.

| | |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| AUTHOR’S NAME | Lindsey Byrne |
| DESIGNATION | Head of Children’s Services |
| CONTACT INFO | lbyrne@eastlothian.gov.uk |
| DATE | 28.5.23 |