

REPORT TO: Education & Children's Services Committee

MEETING DATE: 18 March 2025

BY: Executive Director – Education & Children's Services

SUBJECT: Fostering in East Lothian

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To provide an update to Committee about fostering in East Lothian. Increasing our capacity to provide high quality foster care is a key strategic priority of children's services and this report will provide an overview of the current position, success and challenges.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. The Committee is asked to:
- i. Note the current position in relation to recruitment and the early indications of increased enquiries.
 - ii. Note the action Elected Members can take to support foster care recruitment in East Lothian.

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. Once approved, the person, or people, become approved East Lothian Council foster carers.
- 3.3 When a child or young person is at risk of significant harm and it is not safe for them to remain in the care of their parent/s, children's services will always seek to find suitable extended family options to provide safe and loving care in the first instance. When there are no suitable family members available, we will seek a suitable East Lothian Council foster

care placement as this type of care is the closest to a family setting as possible for the child.

3.4 In response to the difficulty recruiting foster carers in East Lothian and in recognition of the value placed on this important role, in March 2024, Cabinet approved an increase to the foster carer fee paid in East Lothian.

3.5 One year on, it is important to review the current position and explore how we can further improve our capacity.

CURRENT DATA

3.6 The following table shows that there has been a reduction in the number of foster carers and in the number of children living with foster carers since December 2020. Additional foster carers were recruited during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the emergency COVID-19 assessment legislation. Unfortunately, only one person approved during this time is still fostering.

	Full time foster carers	Support care /short breaks foster carers	Number of children living with an East Lothian foster carer
December 2024	46	12	53
December 2023	44	7	46
December 2022	51	6	67
December 2021	51	11	57
December 2020	51	6	64

3.7 In line with our commitment to keep The Promise, East Lothian continues to see a reduction in the number of children who require to be looked after and accommodated (legal definition and not chosen language) out with their family. We continue to prioritise keeping children at home when they are safe and loved. If this is not possible, we will always explore extended family options and are pleased to see an increase in kinship arrangements being supported. Social workers continue to be creative in their ways to keep children in their own homes and communities and it is positive to see this reflected in our recent data.

3.8 The figures of children moving into foster care in the table below does not reflect the number of placements that were not possible to make due to the needs of individual children and young people.

Number of children moving into East Lothian foster care per calendar year:					
2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
35	32	12	19	19	12

3.9 In 2023, we recognised that the number of placement breakdowns and moves for children in foster care was increasing and a new approach to matching children to carers was required to address this. While some moves can be positive for children, such as the identification of a permanent placement or to be reunited with siblings, some moves are unplanned and distressing. In 2020, 20 children and young people had a placement move which was an all-time high for the service.

3.10 The fostering service has reviewed and refreshed their approach to pre-placement planning for children and young people to ensure that all information about the child is shared and understood as well as a detailed plan about how a child is supported to move to foster care. The multi-agency team will anticipate what the child might need in different circumstances and are proactive with additional support the carers may require. It is promising to see a significant decrease in moves for children in foster care with five moves in 2023 and nine in 2024. This figure is regularly reported and scrutinised at the Performance and Policy Review Committee.

FOSTERING RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

3.11 It is well understood in fostering services that only a small amount of people who make an enquiry about fostering, go on to become registered foster carers. The assessment process includes preparation groups and a home study process that can take up to twelve months to complete. Due to the length of time it takes to complete the full process, it is not yet possible to see the full impact of the fostering fee increase. However, this is the first year for some time that we will need to run three preparation groups within one year, a clear sign that the position is improving.

Number of enquiries versus number of people approved as foster carers:				
Year	2021	2022	2023	2024
Number of Enquiries	28	29	34	27
Number of foster carers approved	3	3	4	8 in the home study and preparation phase

3.12 Having paid for recruitment campaigns on local radio and press with little impact, we are focusing on the use of Facebook and a monthly information drop-in to encourage people to begin the conversation about fostering. This streamlined approach was started in September 2024 but is already resulting in a noticeable increase in enquiries. The plan is to extend our use of social media through other platforms at no cost. A previous lamppost wrap campaign is another proven method of attracting enquiries and this is used by many other Local Authorities. Unfortunately, this is not universally supported within the Council, but we hope that this position can be revisited in the near future.

- 3.13 Current East Lothian foster carers welcomed the fee increase and we know that word of mouth within the community has led to carers working for private agencies seeking to move their registration to East Lothian. East Lothian have also approved foster carers who had originally enquired with a neighboring Local Authority. After their assessment they started caring for a nine-year-old girl and this situation is progressing towards becoming a permanent arrangement.

Current challenges

- 3.14 While we remain keen to recruit foster carers for children and young people of all ages, there are two key areas which we would wish to highlight:
- The fostering service continues to find it challenging to recruit foster carers who have the skill set to look after teenagers. The current carers who look after teenagers are excellent and most fostering placements will transfer to continuing care placements meaning the young person can stay in their home for longer. While this is positive for the young person and it is practice, we wish to encourage, it means we are less able to offer new young people a family setting when they require care. Some young people who could be cared for in foster care if a space was available are instead moving to a residential, group living environment. This is not always in their best interests and can affect their outcomes.
 - The number of asylum-seeking young people moving to East Lothian via the Home Office National Transfer Scheme continues to increase. We have tried to recruit dedicated carers for this group of young people, but this has not been possible. Our current cohort of foster carers can be reluctant to offer a placement due to the lack of information we receive about each young person, and this makes it impossible to consider important matching factors, particularly when there are other children in the household. There can be additional complexities such as cultural differences and we are keen to hear from people who would be willing to receive dedicated support to care for this cohort of young people.

PRIORITIES FOR 2025 / 2026

- 3.15 The fostering service is aiming to run three preparation groups this year and have a target to exceed last year's recruitment. This feels possible if enquiries continue to remain steady. Other key priorities for this year include:
- Broadening our social media presence and reach with support from East Lothian's communications team.
 - Further focused recruitment campaigns to attract people who have an interest in caring for young people seeking asylum.
 - To improve the involvement of foster carers and care experienced young people in our recruitment processes.

- Remain connected to national developments in foster care recruitment to ensure East Lothian can benefit from this new targeted approach.

3.16 Committee members are well placed to support foster care recruitment, and we particularly appreciate social media posts being shared amongst varied networks. We continue to try and keep pace with neighboring Local Authorities and are aware that some have increased their own fostering fees in recent months. During 2025, we will consider a new proposal for incremental rises in fees and allowances to ensure we make fostering an attractive career option for those with the skills and values we require.

3.17 Our fostering community in East Lothian provide exceptionally high standards of care to babies, children and young people and this is evident in the passion and commitment shown by carers and the outcomes achieved. The fostering service is a pivotal part of children’s services, and we are grateful for the support of the Committee and Elected Members in supporting recruitment and championing fostering in East Lothian as a rewarding and valued career.

4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 None.

5. EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT

5.1 The subject of this report does not adversely affect the wellbeing of the community or have a significant impact on equality, the environment or economy.

6. RESOURCE IMPLICATION

6.1 Financial – none

6.2 Personnel - none

6.3 Other – none

7 BACKGROUND PAPERS

7.1 None.

AUTHOR’S NAME	Lindsey Byrne
DESIGNATION	Head of Children’s Services
CONTACT INFO	Email: lbyrne@eastlothian.gov.uk
DATE	26 February 2025

