

17 March 2025

Agenda Item: 10

REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES SELECT COMMITTEE

OUTCOMES TO THE REVIEW OF RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION WITHIN NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S FOSTERING SERVICE

Purpose of the Report

1. To share with the Children and Families Select Committee the findings from the task and finish review around fostering recruitment and retention and to seek the endorsement of the committee for the recommendations of the review to be submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

Information

2. At its meeting on 15 April 2024, the Children and Families Select Committee considered a report on the progress of the Council's Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy for Children in Nottinghamshire 2023-2025, particularly with regards to children in care and care leavers. As part of their discussions, Members noted the financial pressure on the Children and Families department from the increasing costs of residential placements for looked after children as result of a fall in the number of Council-employed foster carers. As a result, the Committee resolved:

“That a task and finish review be carried out to examine in detail the issues surrounding Looked After Children and Care Leaver placement sufficiency and to offer subsequent recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Children and Families”.

Review Scope

3. Subsequently work was carried out to “scope” the review. This work was carried out by the Chairman of the Children and Families Select Committee, in consultation with the Service Director, Help, Protection and Care, and officers from the Fostering Service. This work identified the key objectives of the review as well as the strategic and legislative context in which the issues involved would be considered.
4. The key objectives set out for the review were:
 - To gain an understanding of the current challenges being faced by the Council around the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

- To gain an understanding of the current work that is being carried out to increase recruitment and improve the retention of foster carers.
- To consider what changes to current practices, procedures and policies could be implemented to increase recruitment and improve the retention of foster carers.
- To consider how wider activity across the Council (as the Corporate Parent) could be developed to support the recruitment and retention of foster carers.
- To consider how wider activity with the District and Borough Councils could be developed to support the delivery of activity around the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Links to Council Priorities

5. The work of the Council's scrutiny function should always be focussed on supporting delivery of its strategic priorities, which will in turn support the delivery of the best possible services to the residents of Nottinghamshire. The work in scoping the review identified that a review around the recruitment and retention of foster carers supported a wide range of strategic priorities, as well as the strategies and policies that underpinned them.

The Nottinghamshire Plan 2021 – 2031

6. The Nottinghamshire Plan 2021 – 2031 is an ambitious plan for the County Council that sets out the Council's strategic vision for the future of Nottinghamshire and the local authority. The activity in the Nottinghamshire Plan is built around achieving a bold 10-year vision for a 'healthy, prosperous and greener future for everyone'. This vision is supported by nine ambitions which will act as a framework for all County Council activity. The scoping of the review identified that the review would support the following ambitions that supported the overall vision of the Plan:
 - Supporting communities and families
 - Keeping children, vulnerable adults and communities safe
 - Building skills that help people get good jobs
 - Making Nottinghamshire somewhere people love to live, work and visit

The Review Process

7. Two information gathering meetings took place on Thursday 7 November and on Monday 9 December 2024 involving the following members:
 - Councillor Mike Introna (Chairman)
 - Councillor Francis Purdue-Horan (Vice-Chairman)
 - Councillor Anne Callaghan BEM
 - Councillor Debbie Darby
 - Councillor Mike Quigley MBE
 - Councillor Nigel Turner

8. The following council officers attended these sessions:

- Amanda Collinson – Service Director, Help, Protection and Care
- Jenny Whiston – Head of Service, Fostering, Residential and Secure Accommodation
- Matt Wesson – Service Manager, Fostering Service

The Council as Corporate Parent

9. Under the requirements of the Children Act 1989 if a child is identified as being at risk from abuse or significant harm by a parent or guardian, then that child could come under the care of the Council, which would then act as the 'Corporate Parent'. When a child comes into care, the council becomes the Corporate Parent. The term "Corporate Parent" means the collective responsibility of the council, elected members, employees, and partner agencies, for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by us.
10. The Council's statutory responsibility as the Corporate Parent is to provide a safe and nurturing homes for all looked after children. Each child in the care of the council looks to the Council to be the best parent it can be to that child. Every member and employee of the council has the statutory responsibility to act for that child in the same way that a good parent would act for their own child. In order to meet its responsibility as Corporate Parent, the Council has a range of possible options for how each child is looked and cared for.

Foster Care

11. Fostering is when an adult or family looks after a child, young person or sibling group, in their own home in situations where their own family is unable to look after them and they have come into the Council's care. Foster carers provide stability, safety and a nurturing environment when this happens. Foster carers give children space and support to flourish and share their lives with the children they welcome into their homes. Some children will stay with a foster family for a short period of time of a few days, while other children will live with their foster families on a longer-term basis.
12. The Council retains legal responsibility for the child or young person in foster care. This is different to adoption, where adoptive parents become the child's legal parents and take on full legal responsibility for the child or young person. Fostering can be either delivered in house through a cohort of foster carers who are directly supported by the Council or through Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) who have their own cohort of foster carers and support networks.
13. Nottinghamshire's ambition is that more children and young people are able to live in family-based placements, close to home. When a child comes into the care of the Council, the first option that is explored is to see if whether a child can be placed into the care of a member of their wider family. If this is not possible, then the Council looks to find a home for the child with one of the Council's foster carers known as in-house foster carers. If there are no appropriate in-house foster carers available to take a child into their care, then a placement with an IFA is sought.

Residential Care

14. If a fostering placement with either an in-house or IFA foster carer cannot be found, then a child will be placed in a children's residential home ran by, or on behalf of the Council. In some limited circumstances a child's needs might identify that a residential home is the most suitable option, however, for the vast majority of children the best outcome for them is to be able to live in family-based placement, close to their home.

The financial costs of looking after children in the Council's care

15. As well as enabling the Council to be able to provide the best possible outcomes for the children in its care, it is also more financially sustainable for the Council to place children with its own foster carers. Currently, the cost to the Council of placing a looked after child with one of its own foster carers is around £20,000 per child, per year. In comparison it costs £53,664 for a child to be placed with an IFA and £312,000 for a placement in a residential children's home. Due to a shortage of foster carers, some of our looked after children have by necessity been allocated foster placements that are located outside of Nottinghamshire. Having more locally recruited foster carers would mean that more children and young people could be placed closer to their families and their communities, which would not only enable the delivery of better outcomes for these children and young people, but also help to reduce the costs for the Council in providing these placements.
16. The costs of placing a child with an IFA or in a residential placement are much higher than the costs involved of placing a child with one the Council's own foster carers due to the Council having to pay additional fees when using an IFA and due to the significant costs involved in operating residential children's homes. Also, as some of these placements may be outside of Nottinghamshire, the costs of transport to a child's school or the visits from a social worker and Independent Reviewing Officer are incurred by the Council. Having more locally recruited foster carers means that looked after children can be placed closer to their families and their communities, reducing the number of children being placed outside of Nottinghamshire and reduce the costs incurred by the Council in terms of transport and accommodation.

The national context

17. In 2023, over 100,000 children were living in the care of Local Authorities (LAs) with 70,000 children living with over 53,000 foster families. Around 38,000 children become looked after each year. However, there is a national shortage of foster families, with 6,500 more foster families needed to meet the demand for providing homes for looked after children. Since 2021, the number of fostering households in England has decreased by 1,045 whilst the number of children needing foster carers has increased by 5,690. Foster carers have identified a number of reasons why they have stopped fostering, including feeling unsupported, feeling undervalued and inadequate financial support being available. In May 2024, the Fostering Network identified that urgent action needed to be taken to recruit more foster carers while ensuring existing carers feel sufficiently supported to continue to foster.

The Nottinghamshire context

18. As of November 2024, the Council had 967 children in looked after care, of which 559 were in foster placements. Out of the 559 looked after children in foster care (including extended

family), 235 children were placed with Council foster carers in Nottinghamshire and 317 were placed with IFAs, of which 150 were outside of Nottinghamshire and 59 were outside of the East Midlands region. There were 158 mainstream and support foster carers employed by the Council. There were 201 children living in residential places, of which 101 were outside of Nottinghamshire and 58 were outside of the East Midlands. Of the children in residential placement, 42 were aged 12 years or under. It is estimated that the Council has 30 children in residential placements who are there due to there not being sufficient foster families available to look after them.

19. Compared with national average and statistical neighbour comparators, Nottinghamshire has a lower rate of children in foster placements and a higher proportion in residential children's homes and semi-independent supported accommodation placements suitable for some young people over the age of 16. With the exception of Lancashire, all of Nottinghamshire's closest statistical neighbours have seen reductions in the proportion of fostering placements and an increase in residential and semi-independent placements over the last five years. The pattern is also repeated when looking at England as a whole, but the scale of change in Nottinghamshire is more pronounced.
20. The fall in the number of foster carers has been due to not enough foster carers being recruited to replace those who have left. A number of factors have contributed to the fall in the recruitment of foster carers in Nottinghamshire. These include the national negative perceptions of institutions involved in the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, as well as societal factors such as the move to home working meaning that a spare room in a household which otherwise might have been a bedroom for foster child is being used as an office or study. The most significant reason for the fall in the number of Council foster carers is that the Council's Fostering Service is facing heavy competition from IFAs and other LAs who are offering more competitive pay rates.

Foster for East Midlands Councils

21. To address the regions wide challenges with recruiting and retaining high quality Foster Carers, the D2N2 local authorities (Derbyshire County Council, Nottinghamshire County Council, Nottingham City Council, and Derby City Council) have partnered to launch a new regional approach to Fostering. A successful D2N2 application to the Department for Education's (DfE) Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme has brought £1.8 million of central government funding into the region for improvements in this area. Foster for East Midlands Councils has a central recruitment hub that engages with prospective foster carers from their initial enquiry through to submission of their full application. This funding will also help improve the support available for existing foster carers across the region, empowering them to create loving, stable homes for children in need. The programme will also be working to deliver an increase in the number of available foster carers across the four local authorities which will improve outcomes for children in care by ensuring that more children can be placed in family-based placements, close to their home. Foster for East Midlands Councils has a recruitment website ([Foster for East Midlands](#)) to represent the four local authorities as well as having an active presence across social media.

Recruitment

22. There are numerous benefits to expanding the Council's foster care provision within Nottinghamshire. It would help provide stable, loving homes for looked after children within

their local area and would reduce the disruption to their lives by being able to be placed with local foster carer's who are close to their family, their community and their place of education.

23. The Council, via Foster for East Midlands Councils, aims to recruit more foster carers to provide more direct support and oversight to looked after children in Nottinghamshire. A marketing plan, which was tied into the Local Offer for Care Leavers and promotion through local business partners, is currently being undertaken to promote roles in foster care. Capital bids will also be made by the Fostering Service to secure further funding for recruitment and other initiatives, for example, to enable fostering families to secure funding to buy larger properties to provide more rooms for foster children.
24. The D2N2 authorities have worked in partnership with the DfE on establishing targets and key performance indicators for Foster for East Midlands Councils around the number of enquiries received and on how many of these follow through to a foster carer being recruited. Additionally there is also a focus on the timely processing of applications, with a target turnaround time of 6 months from enquiry to approval being in place.

Nottinghamshire's offer to Foster Carers

25. To support foster carers, the Council offers a range of financial and practical support. Financial support is provided through a basic fostering allowance alongside an additional skills payment. Skills payments are paid in recognition of a foster carer's experience and training, and sometimes due to the complexity of the support required for a child. In addition to these payments there is also an annual holiday allowance as well as additional payments being available for birthdays, Christmas, school uniform and travel expenses. The current rates of the main allowances in Nottinghamshire are detailed below.

Age Band	Basic Fostering Allowance (weekly per child) 2024-2025 rates
0 - 4	£170.00
5 -10	£187.00
11 - 15	£225.69
16 - 17	£274.56

Level	Skill Payment (weekly per child) 2024-2025 rates
1	£80.00
2	£130.00
3	£180.00

Age Band	Annual Holiday Allowance (per child) 2024-2025 rates
0- 4	£340.00
5 - 10	£312.00
11 – 15	£370.80
16 - 17	£420.24

Foster Carer Support and Training

26. In addition to the financial support provided to foster carers to enable them to carry out their role, the Council provides a comprehensive training and development package. This includes direct support from Supervising Social Workers and Fostering Family Workers. This support ensures that Nottinghamshire foster carers have the skills, expertise and support to provide the best care for our looked after children.
27. The Council works to create support a sense of community amongst our foster carers through networks of mutual support. The Fostering Liaison and Action Group (FLAG) provides a forum for foster carers to talk about and raise measures to improve their experiences. As part of the Foster for East Midlands Councils funding, 'Mockingbird constellations' are being created. The Mockingbird model aims to nurture relationships between cared for children and young people and their foster families by the bringing together six to ten fostering families who act as an extended family who can then provide vital support to one another. Foster carers also have a network of local support hubs and groups which use local venues as meeting points to exchange information and to provide support to one another. Foster carers can also access out of hours support if they require immediate support from the fostering service.
28. The financial support and training provided to foster carers by the fostering service is in line with the National Minimum Standards (NMS) which are set by the Department for Education. The NMS, together with legal regulations around the placement of children in foster care such as the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, provide the regulatory framework that LAs must meet regarding corporate parenting. The standards are used within the fostering sectors and checked by Ofsted, who examine positive welfare, health and education outcomes for children in foster care.

Retention of foster carers

29. As detailed, retaining foster carers is a challenge faced by councils nationwide. To address this, the Council's Fostering Service has developed a plan for retaining foster carers. This plan includes numerous opportunities to provide feedback through surveys, events hosted by the Council, such as the Foster Carer Conference, the FLAG, and the Fostering Improvement Board. Such opportunities help foster carers shape the service and increase their sense of being valued by the Council and by wider society. Improved communications with foster carers can help celebrate success within the fostering provision in Nottinghamshire, provide more direct feedback, and promote training and support opportunities to foster carers. The service is also reviewing its own working practices, as well as encouraging creative solutions to problems through cross-departmental cooperation as well as engaging with external partner organisations.

Continual service improvement

30. The Fostering Service constantly reviews their work through two means, the Fostering Improvement Board and the Action Plan. The Fostering Improvement Board reviews the functions of the service and uses data and a report-driven approach to improve processes such as the panel interviews for prospective foster carers, communication with foster carers on areas of improvement, and finding out why certain foster carers had left the Council. The Board also identifies local community partners who can help with the recruitment and retention of foster carers. The Action Plan involved developing SMART objectives around

improving recruitment and retention within the Council's Fostering Service. A wide area of review has been considered within the Action Plan, including reviewing all processes related to foster care, utilising new technologies much more efficiently to improve outcomes for foster carers, foster children and the wider service, and reviewing the Service's policies, procedures and guidance relating to foster care.

Nottinghamshire as a "Fostering Friendly" employer

31. The Council, and the other three councils that are part of Foster for East Midlands Councils, are members of the Fostering Network's Fostering Friendly employers' scheme. This scheme helps employers to support and recognise the roles of their employees who foster. Nearly 40 per cent of foster carers combine fostering with other work and a supportive employer can make all the difference to someone becoming and staying as a foster carer, enabling them to balance their employment with looking after children.
32. Members of the scheme agree to put in place a fostering friendly HR policy for all foster carers in their employment (regardless of their fostering service). This includes offering foster carers flexible working and paid time off for training and settling a new child into their home. Fostering Friendly employers also help promote the annual Foster Care Fortnight, an annual campaign to raise the profile of fostering and encourage people to consider becoming foster carers and offer children the care they need. Foster for East Midlands Councils is also encouraging other local employers to come forward to become fostering friendly.

Research and information

33. As part of the review process consideration was given to the work carried out by other local authorities to improve the recruitment and retention and what their offer to foster carers looked like in comparison to what was provided in Nottinghamshire. Other local authorities looked at included:
 - Cumberland Council
 - Cheshire West and Chester Council
 - Derbyshire County Council
 - Devon County Council
 - Essex County Council
 - Herefordshire Council
 - Kent County Council
 - Lancashire County Council
 - Leicestershire County Council
 - Lincolnshire County Council
 - North-East Lincolnshire Council
 - North Northamptonshire Council
 - North Yorkshire Council
 - Oldham Council
 - Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council
 - Staffordshire County Council
 - Somerset Council
 - Thurrock Council

- Walsall Council
- Worcestershire County Council

The Department for Education report: Department of Education, *Foster carer recruitment and conversion rates*, July 2023 was also used as an information resource.

Review activity and recommendations

Recruitment and advertising

34. The Foster for East Midlands Councils website is a well presented and informative website that provides all the information that someone would need when considering whether fostering is a possibility for them in advance of them making an initial enquiry and which compares very favourably to fostering web pages used by other local authorities such as Lancashire County Council. Foster for East Midlands Councils also has a dedicated YouTube channel that is linked from its main page that includes videos that show the positive impact and benefits of fostering, both for the children and young people being cared for as well as for the foster carers themselves. As well as providing a step-by-step guide to the processes involved in becoming and working as a foster carer, the website also contains a detailed, but accessible set of FAQs that aim to answer questions that potential foster carers may have around the application and assessment process and on the role and responsibilities of a foster carer.
35. Findings from the review meetings and from the DfE report from July 2023 ('Foster carer recruitment and conversion rates') detailed how some prospective foster carers may have been deterred from proceeding with a full application due to being overwhelmed by the thorough background checks that are made and which require the sharing of significant amounts of personal information about them and their families. Some applicants can also feel that they do not fit the profile of what they perceive to be what a good foster carer should be or that they can't foster based on their ethnicity, sexual orientation or whether they have a disability. However, LAs and other IFAs have been doing more work to advertise fostering to a wider audience. Members of the review group agreed that the website and accompanying FAQs provided an appropriate amount of information on the role, who could foster and, on the application, and assessment process. Members did note however that it was important that whilst the website and other promotional material should be encouraging to stimulate enquiries from potential foster carers, that they should also be clear that the role could, at times, be challenging.
36. Members also agreed that whilst the promotional resources showed the fantastic impact of foster carers could have on the lives of the children and young people they cared for, that they should also make clear that being a good foster carer did not require someone to be "superhuman" with their parenting and caring skills, and should show that good foster carers came from a broad range of backgrounds, all bringing different skills that had the potential to make a positive impact on a child's or young person's life.
37. In addition to the newly designed recruitment website that represents the four local authorities that are part of Foster for East Midlands Councils, as well as following examples of effective foster carer promotion, such as Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, there has been a focus since its launch in 2024 in developing an active social media profile, such as on Facebook and Instagram. This work to raise the profile of the service, and to encourage more

people to consider becoming a foster carer has also been supported by the social media activity of the four local authorities in linking to and promoting this content through their own individual social media channels. Foster for East Midlands Councils also promotes using paid for online advertising. Promotional activity linking into online resources is also delivered internally by the Council on the staff intranet to encourage its staff to consider becoming a foster carer.

38. In addition to the delivery of promotion and awareness raising activity online, other promotional activities have included physical advertising activities on billboards and on buses. In person information events are also held where fostering staff are available (often alongside and foster carers and foster children and young people) to talk about the role and to answer any questions that potential foster carers may have. These sessions are held in a wide range of settings including community centres, supermarkets and libraries. Online versions of these sessions are also available and both type of sessions are advertised on the Foster for East Midlands Councils website and through social media. This type of promotion activity is used by other Councils including North Lincolnshire and Worcestershire.
39. Members of the review group agreed that the coming together of the four local authorities to promote fostering through Foster East Midlands Councils was a positive step. Members also agreed that the “brand” that had been created was strong and had the potential to have a more significant impact of foster carer recruitment than if all four local authorities were running promotional and recruitment activity independently. Members acknowledged that as Foster for East Midlands Councils was still quite a new brand, further activity should be carried out to increase its profile both online and as well as with physical advertising. Members looked at examples of how other local authorities have been working to promote awareness of fostering and on what type of innovative approaches had taken place elsewhere. Promotional activities by North-East Lincolnshire Council’s Fostering Service have involved the use of places or businesses of local community significance to promote fostering, for example, Grimsby Town Football Club has advertised Lincolnshire’s fostering service on matchdays. Members of the review group agreed that more could be done to utilise the potential that working with local football clubs, leisure centres and other community facilities to advertise fostering, especially in areas where there was a high demand for new foster carers.
40. Members of the review group also recognised that any advertising of fostering should highlight the realistic expectations of fostering, but also make it clear that anyone with the passion, drive, and caring nature could be a foster carer, regardless of their background or circumstances. Members also agreed that how advertising and promotional activity was best carried out would vary both across Nottinghamshire and in the wider D2N2 area to make sure that the right activity was being carried out in the right place and at the right time.
41. Members of the review group agreed that whilst the activity that was carried out by the fostering service to raise awareness and encourage Council employees to consider fostering was welcome, that there was significant potential to expand this type of activity further. Members identified that as well as the Council, there were many other large employers across Nottinghamshire, such as the NHS and who had employees that could be encouraged to become foster carers. A similar approach is taken by North Lincolnshire Council to promote foster carer recruitment to schools, nurseries, hospitals and community groups. Members agreed that there was the possibility of increasing recruitment of foster carers by building relations with other employers to promote fostering with their employees. Members also

agreed that such partnership working also provided an opportunity to encourage more employers to develop 'Fostering Friendly' accreditation and practices.

Recommendation One:

That to further raise the profile of fostering, and to encourage more initial enquiries from potential foster carers to be made, that the Council through Foster for East Midlands Councils:

- a) looks to carry out further large scale awareness raising marketing and advertising activity in areas with high public visibility.***
- b) explores the possibilities of working in partnership with other large employers to promote fostering and how these employers can be worked with to encourage and support their employees to consider becoming foster carers.***

Remuneration and allowances

- 42. A key aspect of the review was to understand the different offer(s) available to foster carers, either as in house foster carers or IFAs and seeking to understand best practice.
- 43. In June 2024, the Cabinet Member for Children and Families approved an increase to the standard fostering allowances and fees paid to foster carers looking after children and young people above those as prescribed by the Department for Education for 11-15 and 16-18 year olds. The rates for foster carers caring for children in the for the lower age bands (0 - 4 and 5 -10 year olds) remained at the levels set in the National Minimum Fostering Allowances. The increase in the allowances for the older age bands reflected the particular shortage of foster carers available to care for older children. In making this decision it had been recognised that Nottinghamshire County Council needed to pay its foster carers above the minimum rates to attract new foster carers, retain its existing foster carers and pay at rates comparable to its neighbouring Councils.
- 44. It is difficult to draw a direct comparison of Nottinghamshire's financial offer to foster carers, against other local authorities (geographical or statistical neighbours) as each local authority structures their allowances and rates differently depending on needs, ages, additional allowances such as training and celebration events. Some local authorities show separate allowances (to cover the expenses of looking after a child or young person) and fee/rates (to the foster carer), whilst some are combined payments.
- 45. IFAs offer around £350-450 per week per child/young person, however, the Council is charged around £1,000 per week, with the remaining money used by IFAs to cover central costs, and to provide an element of profit. As such it is difficult to make a direct comparisons between the IFAs offer and that of local authorities. The presentation of allowances is also different at each local authority. For example, Nottinghamshire provides a holiday and festival allowance on top of the standard fees and allowances, whereas some other Councils, such as Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and Lancashire County Council, and IFAs include this in their weekly sum.

46. Members of the review group noted that whilst financial reward was not the primary motivation for people becoming a foster carer, that it was essential that the allowances and fees that are paid for providing such a valuable role were set at a sufficient level in order to prevent dissatisfaction and risk foster carers ceasing to provide their services to the Council. Members also agreed that it was important that the allowances and fees paid by the Council fully recognised the costs involved in looking after a child, especially in view of the increases that have been seen in the cost of living over recent years (a one off cost of living payment of £500 had been made to Nottinghamshire's foster carers in 2024).

Other allowances and payments

47. In addition to the basic fostering allowance and the skills payment that are made to foster carers, the Council also provides additional allowances to foster carers for specific events including birthday celebrations, Christmas, holidays, travel expenses and for school uniforms. Some of these payments are not paid automatically e.g. the payment for birthdays, with foster carers having to submit an application each time in order to receive them. Members noted that the current process could mean that some foster carers could miss out on receiving these payments and agreed that it would be beneficial if these payments could be made automatically or brought together into a single annual payment, rather than having to be applied for each time.
48. From the research carried out as part of the review process it was found that some other local authorities offered retention or other similar payments based on a foster carer's years of service. Lincolnshire County Council provides a retention payment to its foster carers after one, five and 10 years of service. Lancashire County Council and North Yorkshire Council have also provided a welcome payment for new foster carers. Members agreed that the provision of some form of additional payments to foster carers when joining the Council as a foster carer or when they have provided years of good service to our looked after children had the potential to support the wider activity being carried out to ensure that more children could benefit from being placed in a family based placement close to home.

Fees and allowances paid by Independent Fostering Agencies

49. As already detailed, the rates of fees and allowances paid by IFAs are significantly higher than those paid by the Council and other local authorities. For some foster carers this could make fostering for an IFA more appealing even if they felt they would prefer to foster with the Council due to the wider offer around training and development and wanting to work within a public sector organisation. Currently if a foster carer with an IFA wants to transfer to the Council, then discussions take place to see if they could be paid at the same rate as what they are currently receiving from an IFA for as long as they continue to care for the same child/ren. Staffordshire County Council however state on their fostering web pages that they will match the pay rates that a foster carer currently receives from their IFA. This arrangement will continue for as long as they care for the same child/ren. Members agreed that adding clarity to the Council's current position on foster carers transferring from IFAs and being able to retain the same level of payment for as long as they cared for the same child/ren could potentially attract more current foster carers to provide their services through the Council.

Other potential enhancements to the offer to foster carers

50. As part of the review process, members considered what other potential enhancements could be made to the overall Council offer to its foster carers and which could support the ongoing activity to recruit and retain enough foster carers to give our looked after children the family based placement that they deserved as well as making the Council the “go to” provider for foster carers. Members agreed that possible options could be for the Council to consider providing access for its foster carers to a pension or health insurance. Members acknowledged that the provision of such benefits would have a cost and could be complex to implement, but had the potential encourage more people to foster with the Council as most foster carers did not have other paid employment and access to a work based pension or other work based benefits.
51. Members acknowledged that whilst the Council continues to face significant financial challenges, changes to the overall offer made to foster carers would mean an increase in some costs in their delivery. Members however strongly agreed that any activity that could lead to an increase in the number of the Council’s own foster carers should be considered as it could reduce the need to use IFAs or Residential Children’s Homes and provide significant future savings by not having to use these more costly options. Having a family based placement not only provides the best outcomes for our looked after children, but also significantly reduces the costs involved in providing their care for the Council. As such, members agreed that a range of further improvements to the Council’s payment and benefits package for foster carers should be considered as these would not only help provide the best outcomes for our looked after children but also support the Council’s work to deliver the best services in a financially sustainable way.

Recommendation Two:

That to further improve the Council's payment and benefits package for foster carers, and to encourage more people for foster with the Council, that consideration should be given to:

- a) increasing the rates of the fees and allowances that are available for providing foster care.***
- b) putting processes in place that enable the additional allowances (such as at birthdays and Christmas) that foster carers are entitled to be paid to automatically.***
- c) the introduction of additional payments to foster carers in recognition of starting or continuing to provide this essential service.***
- d) enabling more foster carers who currently foster with Independent Fostering Agencies to continue to receive the payment rates offered by their current provider (for as long as they continue to care for the same child/ren) if they become a foster carer with the Council.***
- e) how a form of pension provision for foster carers could be introduced.***
- f) the possibility of providing a form of health insurance for foster carers.***

Council Tax and access to other discounts

52. As part of the review process, members considered how the Council's offer to foster carers could be further improved by working in partnership with the district and borough councils.
53. In 2018 the Council, in partnership with the district and borough councils introduced a 100% exemption for Council Tax liability for care leavers, up to the age of 25. From the research carried out as part of the review it was found that in many other areas a similar Council Tax exemption had been put in place for foster carer households, examples of this included Herefordshire, Walsall, Thurrock and Somerset Councils. Members agreed that working with the district and borough councils to introduce a similar exemption for foster carer households in Nottinghamshire would work to significantly improve the competitiveness of the Council's offer to its foster carers. Members noted that enabling discretionary relief from Council Tax, the Council would be providing practical help and financial assistance to encourage more foster carers to join the fostering service. This in turn would enable more of our children to be placed in family placement, close to their home. As some of the Council's foster carers live just outside of Nottinghamshire's boundaries, members noted that additional provision would be needed in these cases (and which would have a cost impact) to ensure equality of the offer to all of the Council's foster carers.
54. Members also agreed that partnership working with the district and borough councils could also provide the opportunity for further benefits to foster carer households to be provided, such as concessions on leisure facility access, bulky household waste collections and on other services that were provided by these councils. From the research carried out as part of the review it was found that many other councils provided similar discounts on services, however these were mostly provided by unitary authorities. Members acknowledged however that providing a uniform offer around such discounts in Nottinghamshire would be more difficult to put in place as these benefits would have to be negotiated with each council on a case by case basis.

Recommendation Three:

That work should be carried out with the District and Borough Councils in Nottinghamshire to explore how foster carers could be offered:

- a) a reduction in their Council Tax liability.***
- b) concessionary/reduced rates when accessing leisure and other council services***

'Fostering Friendly' Accreditation

55. As already detailed, the Council is accredited by the Fostering Network as a "Fostering Friendly" employer. Council staff who are currently a foster carer are able to receive up to five days paid additional leave for the purposes of carrying out their role, such as in attending assessment, meetings or training in relation to the foster carer role or the settling in of a foster child. The Council's flexi-time scheme and the processes that are in place that enable staff to request flexible working can also be used by foster carers who work for the Council to combine working for the Council with their role as a foster carer. However, the HR policies that can be used by managers at the Council to support staff who are foster carers are not all contained in one separate document. Lancashire County Council have recently submitted a bid to

become a Fostering Friendly employer have created a specific Fostering Friendly Draft Policy which outlines how their staff who were foster carers would be allowed flexible leave and time-off to meet the needs of their foster child.

56. Members of the review group agreed that for the Council as a large employer, and who has staff who are either currently or considering being a foster carer it was important that comprehensive and clear policies were in place that fully supported and promoted its commitment to being Fostering Friendly. Members also felt that the Council's HR policies and procedures could be reviewed to bring relevant HR policies into a single document that would help managers in supporting staff who were foster carers. Members agreed that the Council's current policy around additional leave for foster carers could also be potentially expanded to allow Council staff who are applying to become a foster carer to request additional leave during the application and assessment process if required.

Recommendation Four

That the Council's Human Resources policies and practices should be reviewed to ensure that they are fully "Fostering Friendly".

Recognition and the value of foster carers

57. During the review process members heard how one of the most common pieces of feedback received from foster carers was that they did not always feel that they were treated and respected as equal partners with the Council in the joint effort of caring for our looked after children. Members agreed that whilst it was important that the fees and allowances that were paid to foster carers should be at a level that prevented dissatisfaction amongst foster carers, that the financial reward was not the singular most important part of the offer and ensuring that foster carers felt that they were fully supported and valued by the Council was of significant importance.
58. Currently the Council does not provide any IT equipment to foster carers to support them in carrying out their role. Being online however, with access to IT is a crucial aspect of the work of foster carers, allowing them to communicate with their Social Workers, claim for expenses, and to write and submit weekly reports. Members of the review group agreed that the Council should provide more IT resources to support foster carers in carrying out their role and which reflected their role as equal partners in caring for our looked after children. Such resources could include the provision a council laptop/tablet and corporate email address to enable foster carers to easily access the Council's online fostering resources as well as to receive emails highlighting news, information on training and support, as well enabling direct and secure contact to be made with their allocated Social Worker and the fostering team. Further digital support could also be provided through an online Foster Carer Portal which could be accessed through an App. An App and portal system would help foster carers keep track of their pay and allowances, book onto training sessions, and access support outside of office hours. IT equipment is provided by other Councils, such as Somerset Council, to their foster carers.
59. Providing IT equipment and a corporate email address for foster carers, as well as making the carrying out of important aspects of their role easier, would also have significant benefits around data and information security. At present online communication between foster carers

and the Council is carried out through personal, web based email, which as a communication platform is inherently insecure.

60. Members agreed that the provision of essential IT equipment would add a sense of value and belonging for foster carers as well as being essential for them to carry their role in the most effective way. Members noted that they themselves as Councillors, whilst not employees, were able to access laptops, email addresses and IT support. Members felt strongly that foster carers in their role of caring for our looked after children should also be seen in a similar position, as working for, and as part of the Council.

Recommendation Five

That to further improve the Council's current offer to foster carers, that consideration should be given to providing:

- a) foster carers with laptop or tablet to support and enable them to carry out their role effectively and efficiently.***
- b) foster carers access with a corporate email address.***
- c) a 'Foster Carer portal system and/or App for use by foster carers.***

Celebrating the work of foster carers

61. Throughout the review process, members expressed their thanks for the work carried out by the Council's foster carers who looked after our looked after children and made them a part of their family and by doing so carried out a valuable but very challenging role.
62. Members agreed that our foster carers are a significant asset for the Council whose work and dedication for caring for our most vulnerable children and young people should be fully recognised and celebrated. Members agreed that carrying events similar to the Adult Social Care Department's awards ceremony for its social care workers (Proud to Care Awards 2024) would be a great way for foster carers to be celebrated. Other types of events that could be considered to recognise and champion our foster carers could be awards ceremonies or garden parties for all fostering families. Oldham Council, for example hosted a Fostering Awards Night in October 2024. Members agreed that hosting events like this would not only reemphasise to foster carers how valued they were by the Council, but would also help raise the profile of foster carers and of fostering with the wider public.

Recommendation Six:

That the Fostering Service should host a variety of high profile recognition events to further champion and publicise the vital role and achievements of foster carers across Nottinghamshire.

Learning from Best Practice

63. As detailed throughout the report, the recruitment and retention of enough foster carers to provide sufficient high quality, family based placements for looked after children is a challenge for local authorities across the country.

64. Throughout the review process members welcomed the focus and energy that was being given to increasing the number of the Council's own foster carers and agreed that the implementation of Foster for East Midlands Councils would, in time, have a positive impact in increasing the recruitment of foster carers in Nottinghamshire. The research that has been carried out as part of this review, and detailed throughout this report, has shown many examples of changes and initiatives can be implemented to encourage more people to become foster carers, and most importantly, to remain as one. Members of the review group agreed that to further support the activity being carried out by the Council and Foster for East Midlands Councils to improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers that further work should be carried out to examine how other local authorities are working towards and succeeding in improving their rates of foster carer recruitment and retention.

Recommendation Seven:

That the Council engages with other local authorities who are undertaking transformation activity, and that have shown improvements around the recruitment and retention of fosters to consider any further measures or approaches that could also be used effectively in Nottinghamshire.

65. Summary of recommendations

1.	<p>That to further raise the profile of fostering, and to encourage more initial enquiries from potential foster carers to be made, that the Council through Fostering East Midlands:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) looks to carry out further large scale awareness raising marketing and advertising activity in areas with high public visibility. b) explores the possibilities of working in partnership with other large employers to promote fostering and how these employers can be worked with to encourage and support their employees to consider becoming foster carers.
2.	<p>That to further improve the Council's payment and benefits package for foster carers, and to encourage more people for foster with the Council, that consideration should be given to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) increasing the rates of the fees and allowances that are available for providing foster care. b) putting processes in place that enable the additional allowances (such as at birthdays and Christmas) that foster carers are entitled to be paid to automatically. c) the introduction of additional payments to foster carers in recognition of starting or continuing to provide this essential service. d) enabling more foster carers who currently foster with Independent Fostering Agencies to continue to receive the payment rates offered by their current provider (for as long as they continue to care for the same child/ren) if they become a foster carer with the Council.

	<p>e) how a form of pension provision for foster carers could be introduced.</p> <p>f) the possibility of providing a form of health insurance for foster carers.</p>
3.	<p>That work should be carried out with the District and Borough Councils in Nottinghamshire to explore how foster carers could be offered:</p> <p>a) a reduction in their Council Tax liability.</p> <p>b) concessionary/reduced rates when accessing leisure and other council services.</p>
4.	<p>That the Council's Human Resources policies and practices should be reviewed to ensure that they are fully "Fostering Friendly".</p>
5.	<p>That to further improve the Council's current offer to foster carers, that consideration should be given to providing:</p> <p>a) foster carers with laptop or tablet to support and enable them to carry out their role effectively and efficiently.</p> <p>b) foster carers access with a corporate email address.</p> <p>c) a 'Foster Carer portal system and/or App for use by foster carers.</p>
6.	<p>That the Fostering Service should host a variety of high profile recognition events to further champion and publicise the vital role and achievements of foster carers across Nottinghamshire.</p>
7.	<p>That the Council engages with other local authorities who are undertaking transformation activity, and that have shown improvements around the recruitment and retention of fosters to consider any further measures or approaches that could also be used effectively in Nottinghamshire.</p>

Acknowledgements

66. The Chairman and the members of the review group would like to express their thanks for the invaluable support provided during review process by Amanda Collinson, Service Director – Help, Protection and Care, Jenny Whiston, Head of Service – Fostering, Residential & Secure Accommodation and Matt Wesson – Service Manager - Fostering Service.

Other Options Considered

67. None. The recommendations of the review, if approved and to comply with the requirements of the Constitution are required to be submitted to Cabinet for their consideration.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

68. To comply with the requirements of the Constitution that the findings of a scrutiny review are submitted to the Cabinet for their consideration.

Statutory and Policy Implications

69. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Financial Implications

70. There are no direct financial implication relating to the recommendations in the report.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the recommendations from the scrutiny review around recruitment and retention within the Council's Fostering Service, as detailed in the report, be endorsed, and referred to Cabinet for consideration

Councillor Mike Introna
Chairman of the Children and Families Select Committee

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Constitutional Comments (GR 20/02/25)

71. Pursuant to the Nottinghamshire County Council constitution this committee has the delegated authority to receive this report and make the recommendation contained within it

Financial Comments (SH 06/03/2025)

72. There are no direct financial implication relating to the recommendations in the report.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

- [Children and Families Select Committee, Monday 15 April 2024 – Agenda Item 6: Progress with the Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy for Children in Care and Care Leavers](#)
- [Department of Education, Foster carer recruitment and conversion rates, July 2023](#)

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

- All