

<b>24 October 2024</b>	<b>ITEM: 9</b>
<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b>	
<b>Recruitment and Retention of Foster Carers</b>	
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> None
<b>Report of:</b> Liz Shields – Service Manager Fostering and Adoption	
<b>Accountable Assistant Director:</b> Janet Simon – Assistant Director, Children’s Services and Early Help	
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Sheila Murphy – Executive Director of Children’s Services	
<b>This report is</b> Public	

## **Executive Summary**

This report provides an outline to the Corporate Parenting Committee detailing the progress in recruitment activity for Foster Carers in Thurrock. It also sets out the broad headlines around our retention plan to address the overall need for sufficiency of Foster Carers.

In line with national challenges, we are experiencing difficulty in recruiting the volume of foster carers we need to meet the needs of our children. We are currently supporting enough foster carers to keep the current number of children placed with in-house carers stable. However, our ambition is to sufficiently to grow the service, keep more children local and ensure appropriate matching of children to carers.

Increasing our number of Foster Carers remains a key priority for the service and this report will detail the steps being taken to address this.

### **1. Recommendations**

- 1.1 That members are sighted on the work undertaken in the foster service in respect of fostering, recruitment and retention to ensure sufficiency of care for our Looked After Children.**
- 1.2 Members to provide challenge and feedback in relation to the plan to ensure it is effective in achieving recruitment targets, retaining high-quality foster carers and addressing any gaps in provision, supporting the objective of providing sufficient, stable, and nurturing placements for our Looked After Children.**

## 2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 There is a statutory requirement to ensure there is sufficiency of placements for Thurrock Looked After children. The overall context for meeting the sufficiency duty is set out in the statutory guidance:

*“Securing sufficient accommodation that meets the needs of Children Looked After is a vital step in delivering improved outcomes for this vulnerable group. Having the right placement in the right place, at the right time is a critical success factor in relation to the delivery of better outcomes for Children Looked After.”*

When a child is unable to live with their birth family there are a range of options that can be considered to meet their needs whilst they are living away from home. In the first instance, wherever safe to do so, we would look to place children within their existing networks with ‘connected’ or family and friends’ carers. This is known as kinship care and can include foster placements, and Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Orders.

If there is no one within the child’s network who can care for them then most children are best placed in foster care, where they can live in a nurturing family environment. For some of our most complex children they may require a residential placement and for young people over 16 they can also live in supported accommodation.

The service is dedicated to ensuring children enter into Thurrock’s care only when really needed and that they are looked after in the right placement and wherever possible this should be within a family setting.

Thurrock’s Fostering Service believes that our local children benefit most from living with our local Thurrock foster carers wherever possible. This enables children to have continuity in their schooling and in maintaining relationships with their families, peers and with their social worker. We also believe that this enables us to ensure that children are living with foster carers we know well, enabling appropriate matching and maximising the potential for placement stability. As a service we are committed to ensuring that our carers receive the highest possible standards in recruitment, training, support, and monitoring. Our vision is to have a whole service culture of therapeutic and trauma informed parenting in order to support our carers to meet the needs of our children in their care.

Young people should be able to have secure, stable, and settled placements so they can transition into adulthood with the skills to progress to independent living. This report focusses on the approach of Thurrock’s Fostering Service to ensure sufficiency of Thurrock in-house foster carers.

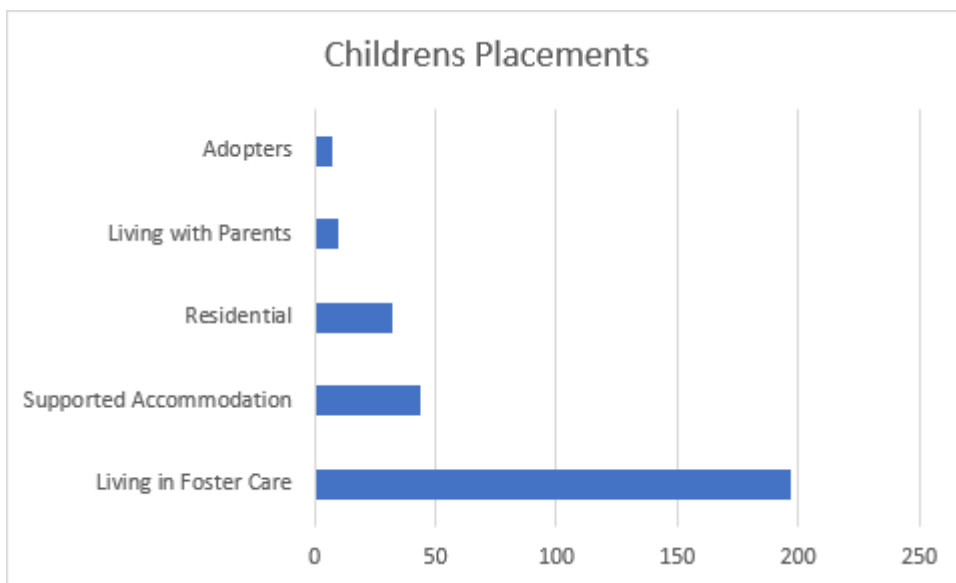
The Fostering Service is responding to an increase in complexity of children and young people’s circumstances who need to be looked after by Thurrock Council. This report provides analysis of our recruitment, approval, training, supervision, and support of Thurrock Council’s foster carers.

This report should be read in conjunction with the Thurrock Council Sufficiency Strategy for Children in care and Care Leavers.

### 3 Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

#### 3.1 Our current need

On 31 March 2024 there were 290 children looked after by Thurrock Council. They were placed as follows:



Of the 197 children placed in Foster Care, the breakdown is as follows:

<b>Thurrock Approved Carers</b>	
Number of children placed with Thurrock Approved Foster Carers	103
<b>Independent and Other Fostering Agencies</b>	
Number of Children Placed with IFA	94

The number of children placed with Thurrock approved carers varies throughout the year, but it is usual for the range to be between 100-120 children placed with our own foster carers.

In the first quarter of 2024/25 we have started to see our CLA numbers fall overall but especially the numbers of children living with IFA carers. At the time of writing this report, figure show that there are currently 109 children living with in house carers and only 78 children living with IFA carers.

We continue to have a need for carers for all children, but especially for older children (aged over 11 years) and for carers who can accommodate sibling groups. We also have a need for more carers from Black and Asian backgrounds so that children can be culturally matched wherever possible as well as carers for our USAC. We are also seeing a continued need for carers for young children 0-5 and are actively recruiting carers for this age group also.

### 3.2 Total number of approved mainstream fostering households

Year	Number of households
31 <sup>st</sup> March 21	81
31 <sup>st</sup> March 22	79
31 <sup>st</sup> March 23	74
31 <sup>st</sup> March 24	76

Overall carer numbers fell in the years following covid, however for the first time since before covid, last year we had a small overall net gain in carer numbers. Although there has not been an increase in new approvals, we have had a decrease in households leaving fostering, which is a positive indication that the retention plan which was introduced in 2023 in starting to have an impact.

Our aims for carer retention for the last year were:

1. Improved communication with carers and staff across children's services.
2. Increased carer involvement in running the service.
3. Protecting carers from 'burn-out' and supporting them with difficult issues.
4. Raising profile of carers and recognition for the role carers take.
5. Improved outcomes for our children including placement stability and achieving permanence at the earliest possible opportunity.

### 3.3 Approvals and Deregistration's

#### 2021/2022

- Newly Approved Fostering Households: 11 Households
- Applications made that did not result in approval: 17 Households.
- Left Fostering: 13 Households

#### 2022/23

- Newly Approved Fostering Households: 6 Households
- Applications made that did not result in approval: 7 Households.
- Left Fostering: 11 Households

## **2023/24**

- Newly Approved Fostering Households: 7 Households
- Applications made that did not result in approval: 4 Households.
- Left Fostering: 5 households.

## **2024/25 year to date**

- Newly Approved Fostering Households: 1 Households
- Left fostering year to date: 1 Household.
- Current ongoing assessments: 6 Households

Out of the carers who left fostering in 2023/24:

2 households retired.

1 household transferred to an IFA (having moved to a different area)

1 household was deregistered owing to standard of care concern.

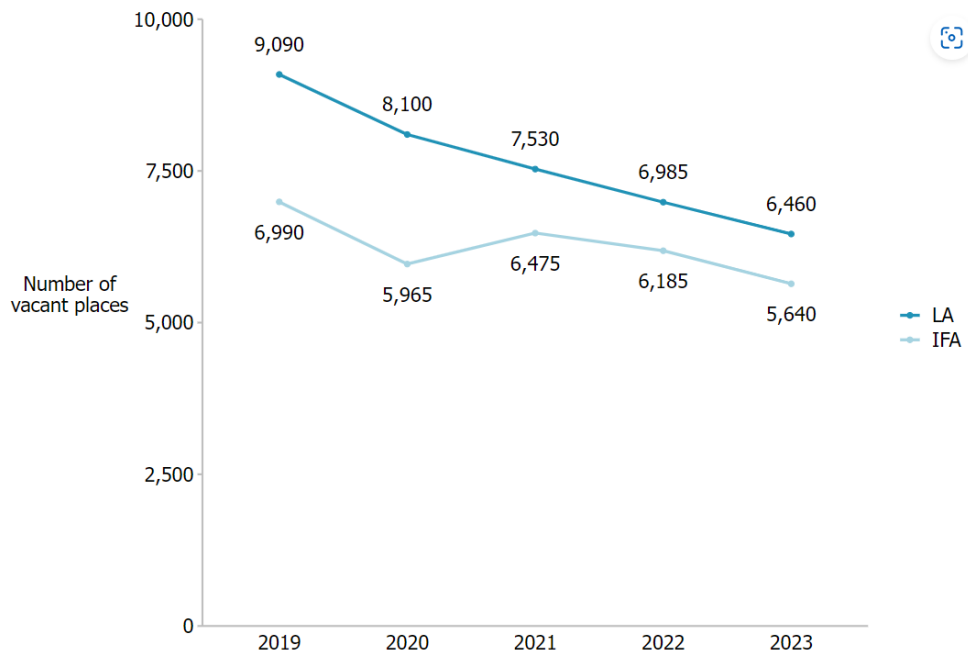
1 household left owing to personal reasons.

We continue to see year on year a fall in applications to foster, however enquiries were slightly up in the last financial year. This will be explored further in the sections below. This is in line with the national picture and requires a new strategic plan to address the barriers to people progressing with applying to foster.

### **3.4 The National Picture**

Ofsted provide annual statistics on the national picture for fostering<sup>1</sup>. It last reported in November 2023. Key points from the report in terms of recruitment are:

- There has been a net decrease of 11% in the number of mainstream LA households from 2019 to 2023.
- The use of IFAs for mainstream foster care is increasing.
- There has been a downward trend in the number of applications and newly approved households for mainstream fostering since 2019.
- Compared with 2019, a higher proportion of mainstream fostering places are filled or unavailable. Over the same period, the number of vacant places has decreased.



In February 2023 the Department for Education set out its response to the National Care Review ‘Stable Homes Built on Love’<sup>2</sup>. Key highlights for fostering are:

- The Government will support a campaign to recruit 3000 more foster carers nationally, this will be piloted in the Northeast in 2023 and to other regions in 2024.
- The national minimum allowance (not fees) for foster carers will increase by 12.43% in April 2023 for each area. This was funded via the existing Social Care Grant in 2023/04, the distribution of which is agreed at a local level.
- Support for kinship arrangements are to be reviewed which could lower the demand for foster placements in years to come by preventing children from coming in to care and enabling more children to live with family members as private arrangements.

In May 2023 the Department for Education set out a further paper with details of their pilot plans for fostering services.

The DfE writes:

We have pledged to put love, relationships, and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care. When care is the best choice for a child, it is critical that the care system provides stable, loving homes close to children’s communities. Homes that provide consistency, stability, and warmth. To start changing the way we provide stable, loving homes for children in care, over the next two years the government has pledged to deliver a fostering recruitment and retention programme so foster care is available for more

children who need it, investing over £27 million over the next two years. This will boost approvals of foster carers in areas of specific shortage, as well as addressing retention through better support to existing foster carers.

The programme is designed to deliver end-to-end improvements that support boosting foster carer numbers: starting with attracting new leads to and expanded support offer to those already fostering. The programme includes:

- A recruitment support hub to provide information about fostering and support alongside the assessment and approval process to maximise the number of people who take forward a fostering application.
- A marketing campaign to attract new foster carers.
- Roll out of Mockingbird - an evidence-based programme across the region to support retention of foster carers.

### 3.5 Update on the DfE Fostering Pilot

On the 01 June 2024 Thurrock joined with all 11 Local Authorities in the Eastern Region to launch the pilot of the regional recruitment hub known as Foster East. The DfE has set a target to increase enquiries by 20% on the 2023/24 figures.



So far, we have not seen a significant change in the number of enquiries and numbers remain slightly down on last year's figures (explored further below). All referrals are being processed through the central Foster East CRM system to enable tracking of enquiries. There has been added value in terms of the sharing of learning and expertise across the region and it is hoped that the launching of a regional marketing campaign will help to raise awareness and visibility across the region.

The key part around retention from the DfE pilot is to provide initial funding to launch the Mockingbird model of fostering in Thurrock. Mockingbird is a global award winning and pioneering programme led by The Fostering Network in the UK. It delivers sustainable foster care through an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides. The model nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community.

[Mockingbird film](#)

We aim to launch our first constellation by the end of this year.

### 3.6 Recruitment Activity

In line with national challenges, we are experiencing difficulty in recruiting the volume of foster carers we need to meet the needs of our children. There continues to be significant recruitment activity to recruit new foster carers within Thurrock and the surrounding area. A wide array of engagement events has been held in and around Thurrock and our brand is visible in the Thurrock Community.

In May 2024 we ran a 2-week focused campaign as part of the National event Foster Care Fortnight. This focused on awareness raising and local engagement in line with this year's theme 'Fostering Communities'. Our existing carers supported the recruitment team in holding over 17 events over the 2 weeks engaging with local businesses and community groups to engage the public. The team held face to face and virtual information sessions as well as running a targeted social media campaign.

We have continued to draw on behavioural insight research which shows that most applicants consider fostering for on average 7-10 years before applying, to think of ways to keep previous enquiries engaged with the message around the need and to drive them to take the next step and make an application. We have continued to send a quarterly newsletter to previous enquirers, providing them with useful reading and tools to increase their knowledge and skills so that they are better prepared if they do decide to progress. We have also sent out the annual calendar and Christmas card to 'keep warm' past enquirers.

The majority of our enquiries continue to come through the council website or through direct enquiries at events.





### 3.7 Advertising Impact:

The following table sets out which adverts have been referred to by applicants when a formal enquiry is made for the financial year 2023/24:

<b>Advert</b>	<b>Reports</b>
Thurrock Council Offices/Website/jobsite	43
Facebook/Social media apps	33
Follow up card/Calendar/Xmas card	1
Gazette	0
Google Search/Online	12
Lakeside/Event/Drop-in	42
Lamppost (Gray's Bus Station)	1
Leaflet through door	6
Reach/Local IQ (now ended)	22
Nothing Noted / nothing seen	5
Other Newspaper/Publication (including Thurrock's residential newsletter)	6
Radio (none at present)	1
Referral (& was previous FC & word of mouth, previous enquired)	31
Roundabout or Billboard	2
Other poster	3
Radio	0
School or Church (Banner or newsletter)	2

	<b>21/22 total</b>	<b>22/23 total</b>	<b>23/24 total</b>
<b>Number of households attending Information Sessions</b>	39	27	16
<b>Number of Enquiries</b>	171	127	153
<b>Number of IVs completed</b>	72	41	23
<b>Number of Applications Received</b>	18	17	10
<b>Number of applications dropped out</b>	17	9	4
<b>Numbers of households approved at panel</b>	11	6	7
<b>Enquiry to approval conversion ratio</b>	6%	4%	5%

As well as looking at where enquiries come from, we are mindful of which enquiries are most likely to progress to full approvals. Our own data shows us that the best quality leads come from events where applicants have spoken to a member of the recruitment team or a foster carer in person, or through word-of-mouth leads. Applicants are most likely to progress if they enquire already having a good understanding of fostering and what the role entails. With this in mind we seek to maximise opportunities for our existing carers to speak to their networks about fostering, incentivising this with the 'refer a friend' scheme.

### 3.8 Enquiries and applications

A key ambitious aim going forwards will be to increase the conversion ratio of enquiry to full approval to over 10%. This would be a very healthy figure in line with national expectations. The ratio remains low for 23/24 at 5%. It is difficult to know the reasons many people do not progress post enquiry as we often do not hear from enquirers again. Those who have given reasons for not progressing include:

- Fostering not in line with what they expected it to be, having heard more about what is required.
- No spare bedroom.
- Limited time and availability to foster.
- Not the right time for them personally.
- Not progressing due to financial reasons.

These reasons would indicate that we need to think about how we proactively engage people post enquiry for them to see how they could manage fostering alongside other commitments or were not receiving enquiries from the right kind of people.

It is vital that the service we provide is welcoming, friendly, efficient, informative, and honest response to enquiries. We are confident that all enquirers receive a warm welcome and are responded to on the day by our skilled team, provided with an information pack and invited to the next information evening. Initial visits are booked within 5 days.

The DfE research made the following observations around what potential enquirers need to help them to move forwards:

***A 'safe space' to ask questions and easily access reliable information to dispel worries about being judged; uncertainty on where to find the information they needed; and confusion about differences about agencies or the system's dynamics.***

***Embracing challenge in a supportive way. Acknowledging that challenge is part of the experience for everyone, reinforcing the value for children, and providing a context for coping with challenge through support will make prospective applicants feel more comfortable.***

***Access to the everyday reality of fostering and adoption, whether through testimonials, online communities, or other forums to share stories and ask questions, to counter misconceptions and normalise the experience of fostering and adoption.***

### **3.9 Review of retention and future plans**

In the last year we have seen an improvement in the retention of cares with only 5 households leaving fostering.

2 households retired.

1 household transferred to an IFA (having moved to a different area)

1 household was deregistered owing to standard of care concern.

1 household left owing to personal reasons.

Of these households there is only 1 household where more/different support could have potentially helped them to consider remaining as a foster carer which was about the carers lack of support network. We are excited about the launch of the mockingbird pilot and the support this will bring to carers who are lacking in support and would benefit from this service.

We will also be working closely with the Thurrock Foster Carer Association to ensure that the voice of our carers remains central to our service planning and design for the coming year.

In the last year we have seen our availability of vacant 'places' fall as our carers are very full and we have a number of carers on hold for personal reasons. We are seeing more children remaining with their carers post 18 under 'staying put', this has lots of benefits for the young people but does reduce the pool of carers who would consider taking an older child.

Thurrock carers are incredibly busy with 109 children placed with 76 households. This demonstrates that most carers are at full capacity. Across the service we currently only have 4 current vacancies, 3 of these places are for children aged 0-5 and all are subject to suitable matching as the carers have other children in placement.

A healthy stretch target is to have 75% of our Looked After Children living in fostering households, where they can live in a nurturing family environment.

We currently have 197 children in fostering of which 109 are with in-house foster carers.

If we had a net gain of 20 households as part of a 3-year strategy this would allow us to keep children closer to home and give increased options for matching.

In addition to the work to address our in-house sufficiency the Local Authority also need to increase engagement with local IFAs to ensure that we are being offered local carers for our children where they are available. This

engagement work should focus on the need for the Local Authority to work in partnership with IFAs to take local Thurrock children.

#### **4. Reasons for Recommendation**

- 4.1 The fostering, recruitment and retention reports provides an overview of the recruitment strategy for members to review and challenge.

#### **5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)**

- 5.1 We consult regularly with our foster carers via a group focussed on Recruitment and through the Thurrock Foster Carer Association. Their views and ideas are included into our planning.

#### **6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance, and community impact**

- 6.1 None

#### **7. Implications**

##### **7.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: David May  
Head of Financial Management

An increase in available Foster Carers would support both improved outcomes for Children Looked After and the containment of cost within the Placement budget of £24.416m.

##### **7.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: Petrena Sharpe  
Safeguarding Lawyer - Team Leader

Thurrock Council is a registered Fostering Agency and recruits Foster Carers in line with its statement of purpose. The statement of purpose sets a framework for all of the business of the fostering agency and is required to be consistent with the Fostering Services Regulations 2011, the National Minimum Standards 2011, and the amended regulations.

The Council has a duty under Section 22 G of the Children Act 1989, so far as reasonably practicable, to secure accommodation for looked after children in the Council area, which meets the needs of those children: where this is consistent with those children's welfare.

Section 22C specifies that the provision of a foster placement is one of the ways the Council may provide that accommodation. The placement, so as is reasonably practicable must:

- a) Allow the child to live near his/her home.
- b) Not disrupt the child's education or training.
- c) Enable siblings to live together.
- d) Meet a disabled child's particular needs.
- e) Is within the Council's area.

The successful recruitment of foster carers will assist the Council in meeting these duties.

### 7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by:       Natalie Smith  
  Head of Community Development

Applications to foster are welcomed from anyone of any background who wishes to apply. They are assessed against the National Minimum Fostering Standards and individual needs, circumstances etc. are addressed in detail.

The Fostering Service is committed to furthering equality, promoting diversity, and eliminating discrimination in all its forms. We are committed to placing the needs of children first; to recognise children, young people, and carer as individuals, and to treat our service users, carers and partner agencies with dignity and respect. We are also committed to raising the profile of equality and diversity issues across the Council.

The Fostering Service actively and consciously values diversity and difference and seeks to provide a high-quality service and fair and equal treatment for all our carers, children, and young people. Our approach to promoting equality and diversity is to provide bespoke services, with due consideration and sensitivity to the complex needs of children and young people and families. Increasing the numbers of foster carers provides greater choice of placements for looked after children and improved matching of children with carers. This will support our Thurrock children to fulfil their potential as they have homes providing stability.

### 7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

None.

### 8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

<sup>1</sup>[Fostering in England 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-in-england-1-april-2022-to-31-march-2023)

<sup>2</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1133537/Children s social care stable homes consultation February 2023.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133537/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf)

**9. Appendices to the report**

None

**Report Author:**

Liz Shields – Service Manager