

## **Fosterlink Diagnostic Report March 2024 – Briefing Note for Corporate Parenting Board**

The Fosterlink Service project has been commissioned by the Department of Education in response to the 'Independent Review of Children's Social Care' (2022) and Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) markets study, 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' (2022).

The project stems from a national shortage of suitable foster carers to meet the growing population of children in care, with the aim to offer in-depth, diagnostic support to local authority fostering service that specifically focuses on recruitment and approval practices.

The Fosterlink Advisor carried out a diagnostic visit to Kirklees Local Authority on 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> February 2024. This included a series of meetings with existing and prospective foster carers, panel representatives, and staff members such as social workers, recruitment officers, marketing and communications personnel, administrators, and fostering managers. Time was spent with Foster Carers to better understand their experiences with the Local Authority during their enquiry and application process and discussed the support they received from the service in the lead up to the assessment. Meetings with staff and panel representatives focused on discussing the assessment process and the preparations leading up to presenting assessments to the panel.

A full report was completed and this document will provide an overview of the findings and recommendations:

### **Overall findings:**

- The fostering service has a healthy recruitment budget and Kirklees fostering has some unique selling points such as continuous service allowance, the assessing social worker remaining allocated for a handover period of 3 months and a peer mentoring scheme;
- The team is well staffed as a dedicated resource, and there are two dedicated Fostering Recruitment Advisors who manage enquiries and Initial visits. As a result all assessments are completed in house and journey to foster training is delivered in house.;
- There is a clear process for handling enquiries and clear timescales for this;
- There is a system keep in touch with applicants who are not ready to proceed ("back burner cases");
- Feedback from 2 foster carers who have recently been through the recruitment process was that this was timely from initial visit to application;
- There is a well-established foster panel which is flexible. Social workers and applicants report positive feedback in respect of the panel process;
- We know the demographic of its population and are striving to recruit foster carers to meet the needs of the children who need foster carers;
- The Kirklees Corporate Parenting Board has a Kirklees Fostering Network Foster Carer representative on the Board;

- Staff report the Kirklees Councillors are actively involved with the fostering service. The Lead Member is seen as an ambassador for the service;
- The Fostering Service has invested in the Mockingbird programme;
- The Fostering Service is at the early stages of developing Multi-Systemic Therapeutic (MST) fostering.

**The following areas of improvement/next steps were identified:**

- Review the process for receiving and handling telephone enquiries and regular monitoring of the phoneline.
- To complete quality assurance activity in respect of why enquiries cease or withdraw from the process;
- Develop a clear procedure for applicants who aren't ready to proceed now, and consider a "keeping warm" newsletter;
- Consider the fee for an additional child (£63.88) as this may not be competitive when compared to other Local Authorities or Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) in the region.
- The Recruitment and Marketing post is currently vacant and the internal comms team has staffing pressures. As a result there is delay in updating the website. In addition there is a need to consider sharing more locally relevant fostering articles on social media channels.
- Complete a competitor analysis of neighbouring Local Authorities and IFA's in relation to rates and benefits.
- Reviewing recruitment process against key performance indicators to ensure timeliness in recruitment
- Analyse and build upon marketing activity.
- Work closely with Kirklees Fostering Network to involve foster carers in recruitment and training, service development and policies and implementation.
- Consider having a foster panel member with an educational background.
- Review data collection and reporting processes.

**Next steps**

In line with the recommendations the Fostering Service have updated the recruitment and retention strategy (2024-2027) and the recruitment and marketing action plan.

The findings have been shared with the Recruitment Team and developments are underway to implement the agreed recommended actions.