



EXECUTIVE BOARD DECISION

REPORT OF:	Executive Member for Children, Young People and Education
LEAD OFFICERS:	Strategic Director of Children's and Education
DATE:	Thursday, 9 November 2023

PORTFOLIO/S AFFECTED:	Children, Young People and Education
WARD/S AFFECTED:	(All Wards);
KEY DECISION:	Y

SUBJECT: Regional Fostering Recruitment and Retention Hub

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Blackburn with Darwen, Cumbria , Furness, Blackpool and Lancashire Children's Services have collaborated together and have been successful in regional bid to be a pathfinder for the Regional Fostering Recruitment and Retention Hub. The Pathfinder has been awarded £1.2 million. The pathfinder will help others learn how to successfully implement these regional approaches nationally. BWD are the lead local authority (LA).

This report informs the Executive Board about the Regional Fostering Recruitment and Retention Hub and, amongst other matters, seeks agreement for the Council to act as Accountable Body for the Project and to put in place the necessary budget provision for it to operate.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Executive Board:

- **Notes** the Regional Fostering Recruitment and Retention Hub work and the Council's role as the lead local authority.
- **Gives approval for** the Council to act as the Accountable Body for the Regional Fostering and Retention Hub, subject to review and approval of any terms and conditions.
- **Approves** a supplementary revenue budget of £295,900 in 2023/24 to be funded via the Department for Education Grant.
- **Approves** a supplementary budget of £727,800 in 2024/25 to be funded via the Department for Education Grant.

- Give delegated authority to the Strategic Director of Children's and Education, in consultation with the Executive Member of Children, Young People and Education following legal approval to enter into a Partnership Agreement with the other Councils involved in this project.
- **Requests that** a further report be presented to Executive Board should any additional unfunded financial implications be identified throughout the duration of the project including, for example, those arising from the harmonisation of the offer to Foster Carers;
- That in view of the uncertainty of funding for the project post 2024/25, that this matter be subject to a further report to the Executive Board by no later than December 2024 setting out how the project will be funded from 2025/26 onwards.

3. BACKGROUND

The [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) and [Competition and Markets Authority \(CMA\) review into Children's Social Care](#) have called for urgent action to recruit more foster carers. There is a long-standing placement sufficiency problem in foster care, which is likely to worsen due to increasing concerns over the rising cost of living, with strong evidence this is negatively impacting on retention. The implications for this to children's outcomes, as well as local authority finances, demand action. In her oral statement, responding to the Independent Review, Secretary of State Keegan stated that we will 'reform the care system to make sure we have the right homes for children in the right places'. To do this, we must 'deliver a fostering programme to recruit and retain more foster carers'.

In the Government's response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, and CMA markets study, *Stable Homes, Built on Love*, DfE 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. Nationally, as reviewed within the care review- the way we currently plan, commission and provide homes for children in care is not working. This means too often children are living far from where they would call home or in the wrong type of home for what they need. We need to transform the way we provide homes for children, so they are the right homes in the right places. We must also be ambitious for children in care and care leavers - to help them recover, thrive and achieve their potential into adulthood.

To nationally 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. We will test and develop a best practice regional model that can then be delivered more widely. This is called the Regional Fostering and Recruitment Hub.

The Regional Fostering and Recruitment Hub

Our intention is to build upon regional relationships to achieve our regional shared vision for foster care:

To have a foster care recruitment service that meaningfully supports, enables and empowers our foster carers to care for all our children in local stable loving family homes.

As well as a shared vision there is consistency in the sufficiency challenges we are experiencing in foster care recruitment, which we would like to address together through the hub. For example:

- Our foster care cohort is ageing across all the local authorities involved in the cluster.
- There are too many carers who want to care for younger children with far fewer willing and able to support older children who may have more complexity.
- There are challenges in recruiting foster carers who can effectively support the diverse identity of the children in our care.

To address these issues, and others, our Hub will develop and implement a targeted communications strategy to further reach into our communities. The campaign will utilise different digital marketing techniques to reach younger carers from more diverse cultures, with a greater mix of skills and life experiences. The communication strategy will also be focused on ensuring potential carers are aware of the needs of the young people in our care. We will achieve this in part by embedding foster carers as staff within our Hub who will feed into the communications campaign. These “experts by experience” will ensure that potential carers better understand the lived experience of children they will care for in the future, supporting all the way through from enquiry to panel approval.

We will also look to address sufficiency challenges experienced across the wider region of the North West, such as the limited foster carers available for unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). To address this, and as part of this programme, we will be jointly funding a North West UASC role that will sit within the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) recruitment hub. This role will promote regional working with local authorities across the hubs to ensure that the needs of vulnerable migrant children are met and that this vulnerable group is safely supported. This will also include the delivery of a regional campaign to encourage more people to foster UASC or provide supported lodgings.

4. KEY ISSUES & RISKS

As Accountable Body for the Hub, the Council will be responsible for administering the grant funding provided by the Department for Education. At the time of writing the Grant Funding Agreement (GFA) had not been made available so it is not possible to say what, if any, conditions may apply to the grant funding; it is expected that it will reflect standard conditions such as compliance with proper financial controls, achievement of outputs and outcomes etc.

In support of the Council’s role as Accountable Body, a Partnership Agreement will be made with the participating Local Authorities. It is expected that this will encompass the obligations of Partners reciprocating those that apply to the Council so that the risks of not performing the obligations set by the DfE are shared accordingly.

To provide oversight to the Programme, a Governance Board will be established. Amongst other matters, this will be responsible for managing the cluster approach to risk. Risks mitigation rests on quality governance that is clear. We will mitigate risks through our clear governance structure and lines of reporting. In addition, risks will be monitored through a risk register that will be monitored by programme manager and escalated to the operation and governance board when appropriate to ensure that the risks that arise are effectively mitigated.

The key risks include:

- Sustainability of the hub and the hub ongoing costs after the grant period.
- Fostering recruitment is a national challenge and requires wider government interventions
- A tight delivery timeframe
- The hub will be a new way of working across the cluster

There is a full risk register with mitigating actions included and this will be reviewed and updated as required by the Governance Board.

5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The hub approach will replace our existing local approach to attracting potential foster carers and progressing them to assessment. The recruitment of the hub will commence at the end of 2023. As part of the hub being implemented into practice, existing roles and responsibilities within in the cluster LAs will be considered to prevent duplication and streamlining of works.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The total grant awarded by the DfE for the Project is £1,023,697 and followed the submission of a fully costed out business case by Blackburn with Darwen in conjunction with the partnering local authorities. It is expected that the total amount of grant funding will be received during 2023/24 and will be spent in line with the following expenditure profile:

Co-design and set up phase		
Item	Description	Yr 1 (Oct 23 - April 24)
Leadership/ oversight	Service Leader role - 2 months	14,880
Core staff e.g. project manager, project support	Project Manager - 3 months	17,150
Service design	Service Designer / User Researcher - 6 months	45,636
Professional advice e.g. Legal, HR, financial	Finance Support - 3 months plus HR Support	19,993
Website design	Web content lead / development	16,000
IT/ Case management system	Systems Officer - 6 months / Data Lead - 3 months plus system costs	71,036
Administration support	Business Support - 6 months	9,565
Project costs e.g. resources, room hire	IT equipment, Netcall	33,800
Back office costs	Strategic Comms / Marketing Lead - 2 months	5,490
Hub staffing costs (include all staff members)	Advanced Practitioner / Family Support Workers (6fte) / Participation Workers (1.2fte) - all 2 months	62,377
Total Expenditure 2023/24		295,927

Go live and ongoing costs		
Item	Description	Yr 2 (April 24 - Mar 25)
Leadership/ oversight	Service Leader role - 12 months	89,282
Core staff e.g. project manager, project support	Project Manager - 6 months	34,299
Service design	Service Designer - 6 months	18,393
Hub staffing costs (include all staff members)	Advanced Practitioner / Family Support Workers (6fte) / Participation Workers (1.2fte) - all 12 months	374,260
IT/ Case management system	Data Lead - 12 months	55,741
Experienced foster carer input	Foster Carer Support	62,949

Administration support	Business Support / UASC Role - 12 months	35,798
Back office costs	Training Lead (0.5 fte) - 12 months / Strategic Comms / Marketing Lead - 12 months	57,048
Total Expenditure 2024/25		727,770

At this stage, it is not clear how the project will be funded with effect from 2025/26 onwards since the funding being made available to the Council is time limited. In the Application Form for the Programme, DfE state that *'Local Authorities...will be expected to work towards this becoming a long-term sustainable and viable 'front door' for the Local Authority cluster group.*

Indeed, one of the proposed outcomes for the Programme is to *'Deliver cost savings for Local Authorities by expanding the pool of Local Authority Foster Carers, thereby creating costs savings for Councils who will have access to foster homes for children who need them'.*

In the context of the Council's current financial position, it is unlikely that the Council can sustain this activity without additional funding, either from DfE or from other Partners. In view of this, it is proposed that a further report be submitted to the Executive Board by no later than December 2024 setting out how, if the project is to continue, it will be funded from 2025/26 onwards.

Aside from the funding of the Project Delivery, one of the options that will be explored during the implementation stage of the project is the harmonisation of the financial package offered to foster carers across the five participating local authorities. This is described as a shared aspiration in the bid for the funding. There will be significant financial consequences of harmonisation for the Council (and possibly other local authorities within the partnership), however at this early stage we are unable to quantify any potential impact for Blackburn with Darwen. Where it is necessary to do so, a further report will be presented to Executive Board once any further financial implications are known.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

The Council will enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department for Education which, whilst not legally binding, provides a framework for the Council, as Lead Body, will mobilise for delivery of the Fostering Recruitment Support Hub.

A Partnership Agreement is being drafted which will articulate the roles and responsibilities between the Council, as Lead Body, and the other Council's participating in this project.

The MoU and the Partnership Agreement will need to be reviewed by Legal Services. The accountable body terms and conditions will also need to be reviewed.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Funding and resources are covered within the implementation period, the long term funding will be understood once the DfE have shared this detail in 2024. The risk associated with the unknown detail of long term funding is on our risk register.

A project manager has been appointed and starts in a 9 month fixed term post as from 17th November.

9. EQUALITY AND HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Please select one of the options below. Where appropriate please include the hyperlink to the EIA.

Option 1 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) not required – the EIA checklist has been completed.

Option 2 In determining this matter the Executive Member needs to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. *(insert EIA link here)*

Option 3 In determining this matter the Executive Board Members need to consider the EIA associated with this item in advance of making the decision. *(insert EIA attachment)*

10. CONSULTATIONS

Each LA in the cluster have briefed their staff and existing fostering teams. The fostering leads for each local authority have engaged in a workshop on 20th October 2023 to start working together on the hub approach.

11. STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE

The recommendations are made further to advice from the Monitoring Officer and the Section 151 Officer has confirmed that they do not incur unlawful expenditure. They are also compliant with equality legislation and an equality analysis and impact assessment has been considered. The recommendations reflect the core principles of good governance set out in the Council's Code of Corporate Governance.

12. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

All Declarations of Interest of any Executive Member consulted and note of any dispensation granted by the Chief Executive will be recorded in the Summary of Decisions published on the day following the meeting.

VERSION:	1
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CONTACT OFFICER:	Emma Ford
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DATE:	23 rd October 2023
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BACKGROUND PAPER:	
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