

## CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES - COUNCILLOR JIM HOBSON

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Portfolio areas of responsibility:

- Children's social care and targeted intervention services
- Care leavers
- Early help
- Fostering/adoption/permanence planning
- Children's commissioning
- Family Hubs
- Early Years

### Introduction

The cabinet member will present the report to Council and report on any key issues.

### Theme 1 - Regional Fostering Hub

The ability of Local Authorities nationally to place children into foster care has become a national issue. Foster carer numbers are falling, with more foster carers leaving than joining last year. This is compounded by a high rate of people who drop out of the process to become foster carers, with 138,000 enquiries leading to just 8,000 applications, of which only around 4,000 are ultimately approved. Whilst in some cases this is due to the appropriate screening of applications, these rates vary around the country suggesting some approaches are more successful in recruitment and retention of this valuable and key resource.

Funded by the Department for Education, the Regional Fostering Hub is a collaboration between ourselves and Blackburn with Darwen, Lancashire, Westmorland and Furness and Cumberland Councils designed to go some way to meeting the challenge of bringing more people to fostering.

The Regional Fostering Hub has three key elements:

- Develop a clear multifaceted communication strategy to boost enquiries;
- Improve the support for potential foster carers expressing an interest;
- Develop an enhanced retention offer to keep existing carers and attract new carers into a more supportive environment.

The recruitment hub will act as a regional front door and redesign the customer journey following enquiry. Whilst the details will be worked out jointly by the participating Councils, this will include:

- Giving people a dedicated welcome;
- Providing enquiry services staffed by experienced call handlers and foster carers supporting and guiding applicants up to the approvals stage;
- Advising on initial suitability and keep in touch with potential carers to ensure their interest is valued;
- Handing over high quality prospective carers to their local Councils.

Whilst the approval process will continue to be the responsibility of the individual local authorities, the support hub will also provide support alongside the application and assessment process for those who proceed.

The Department of Education will also provide funding directly to the town to enable Blackpool to set up the “Mockingbird” model of foster carer support, which is structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides. It does this by building a community of six to ten satellite foster families called a “constellation”, which is led by a foster hub home carer and liaison worker and which offers peer support for foster carers and guidance alongside social activities and sleepovers to strengthen relationships and permanence.

## **Theme 2 – Children’s Social Care Workforce**

Children’s Services across the country continue to grapple with a staffing crisis. More Social Workers are leaving the profession than entering and there is an increasing number of workforce roles open to Social Workers taking them away from frontline practice with children and families. The situation has also been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis resulting in many staff leaving to work on an agency basis.

Often the gaps within workforce have to be filled by agency workers who provide necessary additional resources but can lack experience and skill. With most only having a week’s notice period, turnover can be disruptive for the service and have a massive impact upon the children and families they are working with. They are also paid at significantly higher gross rates to their permanent colleagues which penalises the loyalty of our permanent staff and can cause disquiet.

Nationally the use of agency staff is currently running at 17% of the workforce, whilst the average in the North West is significantly higher at over 22%, with some areas’ Social Work workforces made up of between 35 and 40% of agency staff. Positively, Blackpool is bucking the trend, with a figure of just 13% bringing much needed stability to the support we provide to children and families.

The Care Review identified Workforce as a key challenge and in October the government published a consultation proposing the national rules that should be in place in Spring 2024. These include:

- Local Authorities to agree and comply with regional agency social worker price caps;
- The notice period for each agency social work assignment to be aligned with the contractual notice period for substantive staff in the same or an equivalent job role;
- Local Authorities not to engage agency social workers for a minimum period of three months after they have left a substantive role within the same region;
- That Local Authorities should only engage agency social workers with a minimum of three years post-qualifying experience in direct employment in a UK local authority.

Some areas, such as Greater Manchester, have already come to a collective agreement about the approach prior to April 2024. In Lancashire, Blackpool's Director of Childrens Services Vicky Gent is leading a pan-Lancashire approach to the national rules.

Ultimately in Blackpool there is a continuous focus upon workforce and ensuring workforce stability is maintained. A stable workforce is key to ensuring the Council achieves positive outcomes for children and families and the most effective interventions occur when with a constancy of practitioner. The two strands to achieving that are recruitment and retention. An approach has been adopted that is the key to both recruiting and retaining staff and will ensure that a culture is in place that is supportive and that allows people to be the best they can be and do the best that can do, supported by managers who offer high challenge but also provide high support. The workforce are the main tool available to deliver successful outcomes for children and families and will always be a key priority.

### **General questions / comments**

Councillors will have the opportunity to raise questions / comments on any matter in the Cabinet Member's portfolio.