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Title of meeting:	CFE Cabinet Member Decision Meeting
Subject:	Annual Fostering Service Report, April 2023 to March 2024
Date of meeting:	30 October 2024
Report by:	Jackie Clark - Service Leader, Fostering Service
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Suzy Horton, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education
Wards affected:	All

1. **Requested by**

- 1.1 Requested by: Lead Member for Children, Families and Education, Portsmouth City Council in line with The Fostering Service (England) Regulations 2011, Review of Quality of Care Regulation 35 and in accordance with the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Service 2011.

2. **Purpose**

- 2.1 The report provides a summary of the work undertaken by the Fostering Service for the period 01/04/23-31/03/24.

3. **Information requested**

- 3.1 Activity of the Fostering Service contribution to the overall aims of the Corporate Parenting Strategy for the Children We Care For.

4. **Introduction - Portsmouth Fostering Service**

- 4.1 The Fostering Service's primary function is to provide excellent care to the children we care for in Portsmouth, by recruiting, assessing, training, and supporting approved foster carers who can offer sensitive and empathetic alternative family homes to children we care for.

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4.2 This report will describe the work of the service and how it achieves the outcomes that are set, from the moment someone contacts Portsmouth to show interest in fostering. It describes the assessment process, to approval as foster and connected foster carers, the training carers receive to support them caring for children. It will describe the route for those children who will leave care through a Special Guardianship Order. It will outline what can be offered to children who reach 18 in a foster family through Staying Put arrangements or who need further support in a supported lodgings arrangement. The report will highlight the work of the Mockingbird model of care since it was introduced 2021. The report will also consider Private Fostering arrangements. Finally, it will provide data about various elements of the work and in conclusion the work for the year ahead.

5. Recruitment and Assessment Team

5.1 This team is the front door to the Fostering Service: 'Foster Portsmouth', through the recruitment of potential foster carers. The team participates in the recruitment campaigns, responds to all potential carer enquiries, undertakes initial home visits and initial statutory training, and the assessment of potential carers. This team works closely with the fostering marketing officer who supports with development and delivery of an annual foster carer recruitment strategy for 'Foster Portsmouth' to increase the numbers of people interested in fostering.

5.2 Foster carers are assessed and approved for the number of children for which they have the skills, qualities, experience, and physical space to care. This could be between 1 and 3 unrelated children. They are generically approved for the age range 0-18, but the assessment enables the assessing social worker and prospective carers to understand and decide their suitability and preferred age range of children. Foster carers can be approved for different types of care: respite, short term, long term and parent and baby care. They may be approved for one or more types of care according to their preference, skills, and experience. Foster carers offering long term care are encouraged to care for the child beyond the age of 18 in a Staying Put arrangement to support the child's transition into adulthood. The team also assesses households offering to support a young adult through Supported Lodgings care to those age 18-24yrs, supporting them with preparation for independent living.

5.3 The foster carers' skills and experience are evaluated during their assessment, when they are approved as foster carers with their skill levels determined at level one, two or three, paid the relevant skill fee. The higher level represents those carers with substantial skills and experience of caring for children with particularly complex needs who require a high level of specific care and support. Those children are more likely to be children aged ten and over, having experienced significant trauma

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through neglect, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse and are vulnerable to exploitation.

- 5.4 Children with disabilities and or complex health needs may be cared for through respite support for families/carers with specifically skilled Family Link carers. There are also specialist parent and child carers offering homes to parents and babies with complex issues. These carers will contribute to the assessment and support of the parent to determine the parents' capacity to care for the child in the longer term. All carers work closely with children's teams and children's families, caring for children for as long as they need to be with them- supporting them to return home or to family members or other permanent arrangement they need. In recognition of the high level of support children we care for need from our committed and skilled foster carers, Portsmouth reviewed the carers skills and allowances policy introduced April 2024.

6. Access to Resources and Fostering Support Team

- 6.1 Access to Resources (A2R) are responsible for identifying external care providers for children needing specialist care. A2R work very closely with the Fostering Support Team that has the statutory responsibility for supervising approved foster carers and supporting them to meet the needs of children. This includes accessing a comprehensive training programme and a range of provision from our partners that meet the needs of children, for example the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), and the Trauma Informed Model Of Care (TIMOC) and the Virtual School specialising in helping children with their education. The Fostering Support Team also facilitate a number of support groups for carers, for example, those caring for children seeking safety and asylum, and those caring for teenagers.

- 6.2 All foster carers are required to have an annual review of their approval, and this process is undertaken by one Reviewing Officer who sits within the Fostering Support Team. The Fostering Support Team also provides an out of hours on call service offering advice and guidance to our carers.

7. The Connected Persons Team (including Special Guardianship Support, Private Fostering and Step-Parent Adoption)

- 7.1 This team works very closely with the children's social work teams to identify and assess potential family members as carers for children unable to live with parents. These family members are assessed as formally approved connected persons' carers and receive supervision and support as foster carers, or they are helped to obtain legal responsibility to care for the child via a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) whereby the child can then leave the care of the local authority. They also complete assessments for private special guardianship families. There were 22 SGOs granted in 2023/24.

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- 7.2 Those family members with an SGO continue to be supported after the order is made. The special guardianship support worker provides monthly support meetings, individual support, and access to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGF), a government grant for funding for specialist therapeutic support to adoptive and special guardian families. Special guardian support is offered by the local authority to special guardian families from the making of the order until the child reaches 18yrs.
- 7.3 The support is provided by the local authority in which the child lived at the making of the SGO for the first three years after the order, thereafter, support becomes the responsibility of the local authority in which the child lives. However, the financial support provided as part of the support plan for a child leaving care for special guardianship remains the responsibility of the local authority in which the child was cared for. Portsmouth reviewed the special guardianship financial support policy in November 2023 which enhances the support to ensure special guardianship families caring for children previously cared for can access financial support to meet the child's needs up to the age of 18.
- 7.4 Some families may make private arrangements for their child to live with a friend or a distant family member and therefore enters a Private Fostering arrangement. As required by legislation, private foster carers are assessed by a member of the Connected Persons team. Children living in Private Fostering arrangements are not cared for by the local authority. There were five ongoing private fostering arrangements and 12 notifications bringing a total of 17 private fostering arrangements in Portsmouth. Children in private fostering arrangements are not cared for by the local authority. However, in the local authority safeguarding role they do have the support of an allocated social worker, and the private foster carer is supported and supervised by the private fostering lead social worker.
- 7.5 Support comprises of regular visits to the child and private fostering family and supporting them with any challenges i.e. with schooling, housing. This year to boost support service introduced annual Household Reviews of all the Private Fostering arrangements. Considering the child population of Portsmouth is 38,000, 17 private fostering arrangements seems relatively low, and we recognise the need to raise further awareness of families needing to inform the local authority if they are caring for a child under this basis. The connected persons team also completes stepparent adoptions of which there were two stepparent adoption orders granted during the year.

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8. The Fostering Panel

- 8.1 To meet legal requirements and quality assure all new carers assessments, prospective and approved carers are scrutinised in terms of their suitability to care by the independent Fostering Panel which meets a minimum of twice per month. The panel consider the assessments of prospective foster carers, the first-year annual review of foster carers, the panel also reviews any carers approval following safeguarding concerns and allegations regarding their care.
- 8.2 Although not a statutory requirement, but because it is considered good practice, the panel also considers the plans for a child/ren to remain living with their carer on a long-term fostering basis until they can return to their family or move onto independent living as an adult.
- 8.3 The panel considers applications of Staying Put arrangements for those children turning 18 and continuing to live with their foster carers and those offering supported lodgings carers, providing semi-independent homes to young adults in preparation for independent living.
- 8.4 The Annual Fostering Panel report gives full details for panel activity for the year and feedback in terms of quality assurance regarding assessments of carers and reviews of ongoing approval. Feedback from the panel chair refers to a good standard in the assessment of prospective new carers and recognises the service commitment to identifying family members to care for children and needing to provide robust support to such families. The report also identifies the need to strengthen the voice of the child when proposing long term linking for children with their foster family. This issue has been followed up with the children's teams.
- 8.5 The report also refers to the panel not having a vice chair which could make the process of approving foster carers vulnerable in the absence of a chair. However, panel members demonstrate a strong commitment to their role and to date since 2020 there has never been a panel cancelled due to lack of quoracy including the chair. The suggestion or a vice chair will be further explored in 2024/25 within the quarterly panel /service business development meetings.
- 8.6 (Please see appendix 1: The Annual Fostering Panel Chair Report June 2024).

The Fostering Service Activity

9. Foster Carer Recruitment (national context)

- 9.1 Nationally, fostering recruitment has been a challenge and data collated by government shows mainstream fostering capacity has decreased since 2018.

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Foster carers generally comprise two categories - mainstream foster carers, who care for non-related children, and connected carers who care for children within their own family/friends' network.

- 9.2 As of 31st March 2023, there were 43,405 fostering households in England, and 35,050 were mainstream fostering households. This is a 1% decrease from 2022 and a 2% decrease from 2019. The number of children living with foster families on March 31st, 2023, was 57,020, which is 68% of the 83,840 children in care looked after away from home. This is a 2% increase from 2022.
- 9.3 There has been a downward trend in the number of applications for mainstream fostering over the last five years, for both local authority and independent fostering agencies (IFAs). A relatively large number of enquiries are not converting into applications.
- 9.4 In the year ending 31 March 2023, there were 125,195 initial enquiries from potential mainstream fostering households. This was 9% lower than the previous year (2021 to 2022) and 2% lower than 2018 to 2019. The Government data collated from local authorities and IFAs indicates that a relatively large volume of enquiries is not translating into applications.
- 9.5 At the end of March 2023, family and friends' households represented 19% of all active fostering households, up from 16% in 2019. This year, the sector accounted for 18% of all approved foster carers and 21% of all children in foster families. There is also a high level of turnover in the family and friends' sector because specific households are approved and deregistered based on need.

Foster Portsmouth Recruitment Activity

- 9.6 For the year 2023/24 Portsmouth has seen a decrease in the number of foster carer approvals, a total of 15 compared with 23 the previous year. However, there was an increase in the number of those enquiring going on to be assessed and approved, up from 9.7% to 10.7%. The national average is 10.5%. The enquiry to assessment rate was 17.1%, with a total of 24 carers being assessed.
- 9.7 A fulltime marketing officer leads on the development and delivery of an annual carer recruitment strategy and focuses on foster carer recruitment.
- 9.8 The achieved strategy for the 2023/24 included:
- Quarterly strategic campaigns:
 - Myth busting (who can foster)

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- Other 'markets' (eg. targeting those working in healthcare with existing Level 3 skills)
- 'Day in the life' (using foster carer case studies)
- USPs (eg. small local authority- we know our children, families and children's social workers and partner agencies- team around the child, and Mockingbird Model of Care)

Additional campaigns/focuses (including):

- Types of care: unaccompanied children seeking safety and asylum, children with additional needs, long-term care, short-term care, respite, siblings, teens, parent & child, Supported Lodgings
- USPs: Training, support, Mockingbird, etc.
- Transfers
- Private Fostering
- Types of carer: Young/older carers, single carers, etc.

9.9 Awareness days/additional campaigns (link to strategies/objectives) including:

Foster Care Fortnight, World Foster Day, Empty Nesters, Care Leavers Week, Child of Foster Carers Month, National Social Work Day, National Care Day, LGBT+ Month/Fostering Week/Pride Month, Refugee Week, Black History Month & Race Equality Week, Int. Women's Day, Disability History Month, and Aspirations Week.

Marketing foundation activities

- 9.10 Events (recruitment event at the Holiday Inn, and pop-up stands in locations such as supermarkets and Love Southsea markets), marketing research project, digital asset development, further website development, case study development, Foster Portsmouth Great South Run team, and Any of Us CAN Digital video launch.

'Always on' and tactical activity

- 9.11 Google advertising, social media advertising, organic search/SEO, PCC magazine articles (Flagship and Housetalk), organic social media (Foster Portsmouth, PCC & others, e.g. Health Care Portsmouth), radio advertising, out of home advertising (e.g. Guildhall Square screen), print/design work (e.g. myth busting scratch cards, teaser postcards), new video production, e-marketing (Foster Portsmouth e-bulletin and PCC e-bulletins, e.g. Family Life,), and PR including press releases (coverage included articles in The News, on The News Online, and interviews on Express FM & Victory Radio).

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- 9.12 The majority of the enquiries received came from the PCC Fostering website, word of mouth and Facebook. Word of mouth is a consistent incentive for recruitment and therefore retention of carers is critical.
- 9.13 There were a total number of 140 enquiries received in 2023/24. Those enquiries were followed up by direct contact by a member of the recruitment team and a home visit for those wishing to proceed. The home visit (if appropriate) leads to the formal application assessment. Marketing research shows it can take two to three years for a prospective foster carer to make the decision to apply to foster after gathering information (direct and subliminal) from various sources.
- 9.14 Local authority and independent fostering agencies (IFA's) effectively compete for prospective carers. For example, Portsmouth will seek to recruit carers from within the city but also within a twenty-mile radius of Portsmouth to enable children we care for to remain in touch with family, their community and attend school or local education provision.

Table 1

Year	Enquiries	Initial Home Visits	Enquiry to IHV	Approved	Home visit to approval	Enquiry to Approved Conversion Rate
2023/2024	140	34	24.3%	15	44.1%	10.7%
2022/2023	237	36	15%	22	61%	9%
2021/2022	216	37	17%	11	30%	5%
2020/2021	274	40	14.6%	29	72.5%	10.6%
2019/2020	269	60	22.3%	31	52%	11.5%
2018/2019	336	71	21.1%	11	15.5%	3.3%

- 9.15 Table 1 shows that the conversion rate for Portsmouth in 2023/24 was 24.3% for enquiry to home visit and 44.1% for home visit to approval - 10.7% for enquiry to foster carer approval. The low conversion rates from enquiry to approval are due to the number of enquiries being made by people not in a position to foster at the time, for example, making tentative enquiries in considering a lifestyle change, not having bedroom space, health issues or not in a financial position to balance employment and fostering.
- 9.16 However there has been a slight improvement in terms of the increase from 2022/23 in the number of those prospective carers going forward to be assessed and

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approved. Some of those coming forward were carers transferring from independent fostering agencies and some were encouraged by existing carers feedback regarding the support offered to Portsmouth carers. Recruitment of foster carers is very much influenced through successful retention of carers therefore it is critical that existing foster carers feel valued by the local authority and are well supported in their role.

9.17 Fostering assessments are completed in a two-stage process over a total of eight months. The National Minimum Care Standards guide the timescale for foster carer assessment. Stage one is for the safeguarding statutory checks to be completed- DBS, medical report and references and stage two the initial training and home/family assessment. In 2020 Portsmouth implemented a practice standard of a total of six months for an assessment to be completed (up to four months for a carer transferring from another agency). For 2023/2024, the average timescale for assessments completed 2023/24 was 5.6 months, which is a slight increase on last year (5.1).

9.18 There were 15 newly approved mainstream foster carers and 50 connected carers which is a total increase of 65 fostering households. During the same period there was a total of 66 mainstream and connected carer fostering households deregistered:

Of those deregistrations:

- **23** deregistrations were initiated by the fostering service as they were temporary approved carers - either family and friends carers providing care whilst the department were working with parents to enable child/ren to return home; family members of foster carers caring for child/children whilst carer ill or needing a break; or were the foster carer was no longer suitable due to safeguarding concerns
- **17** were carers who went on to be granted special guardianship or adoption order
- **24** deregistrations were initiated by foster carers due to retirement, ill health, or change of family
- **Two** transferred to another local authority

9.19 In Portsmouth there were 140 enquiries during 2023/24 resulting in 24 applications being made during that period. Those considering fostering tend to make enquiries at a very early point when they may not be able to make an application and at that point are often gathering information. For example, they need to have a bedroom available for a child, consider their family circumstances including their availability

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to care for a child, and any financial implications. Of the 24 applications made in the year:

- 15 went on to be approved
- 6 were still in assessment (applications having been made in the latter part of the year)
- 3 applications were closed. The reasons for those applications (assessments) being closed were due to applicants': significant health issues; decision to move abroad; not suitable to proceed; or change of personal circumstances

9.20 Those 15 fostering households approved comprised of three applications from fostering families wishing to transfer from independent fostering agencies. This is a decrease from five transferred from IFA's the previous year. However, it remains a positive that IFA carers are still seeking to transfer to Portsmouth and supports the Government initiative for 2024/25, for local authorities to come together and unite foster carer recruitment with regional hubs to promote fostering. In July 2024 Portsmouth became part of the South-East regional hub comprising of 21 local authorities but working closely as a sub-cluster with Hampshire, Isle of Wight and Southampton.

9.21 Portsmouth will continue to promote its strengths, based on feedback from those choosing to become foster carers for Portsmouth. i.e, Portsmouth Fostering Service being local, with a sense of community, with close contact with the fostering children's teams and the support available, for example foster carer mentoring and the Mockingbird model.

10 Numbers of Approved Carers and Placements

10.1 As of 31/03/24, Portsmouth had **232 fostering households (Table 3)**.

10.2 Each carer household will be approved for a specific number of children according to bedroom availability, the carer's preferred age range of child, and the skills and experience of carers in meeting children's needs. Those fostering households will also offer variation in terms of short term, long-term and/or respite care. Those households have the potential to provide homes for a total of 481 children at any one time according to the number of children and type of care for which they are approved. 41 of the 232 fostering households were connected carers.

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- 10.3 This means 17.7% fostering households were approved specifically to care for the child/ren to whom they are related and are therefore not "mainstream" foster carers. Three foster carers were approved adopters and were temporarily approved as foster carers specifically for the children they were seeking to adopt therefore were also not mainstream foster carers. There has been an increase in connected carers for Portsmouth from 14% in 2023 to 18% in 2024. The increase reflects the national trend for increasing number of connected carers by 29% since 2018. Approximately 1 out of every 6 fostering households in England offers family and friends provision, providing care for about 1 in 5 fostered children.
- 10.4 The mainstream foster carers can be approved for a maximum of three children, four if siblings. Not all carers will be approved for the maximum number of children according to their wishes, skills, experience. Carers may not have the maximum number of children in their care at any one time. For example, a child with very complex issues and high support needs may need be the sole focus of the carer. Some carers may choose to limit the number of children they look after for a period due to their own personal circumstances.
- 10.5 Some carers may be on hold for personal reasons, or because a formal complaint about their care is being investigated and as a result they are not available to look after any foster children. If a carer is on hold for 12 months, or they have a change in their household circumstances, they would have a review of their approval. The carers approval status will also impact on their capacity. They may be approved for respite, short-term and long-term care. Some may also be approved for parent and baby care. For example, if they are providing parent and baby care, the carers would not be able to care for another child in any of the other categories.

11 Children We Care For

- 11.1 At 31/03/24, there were 402 children in our care. At that point 206 were living with Portsmouth foster carers which is the equivalent of 51.24% within our own fostering family households.
- 11.2 Of the remainder of those children:
- 26 children were living in PCC or external residential children's home
 - 47 children were with independent fostering agency carers (IFAs)
 - 32 children with a care order were placed with their parents
 - Two were in parent and baby residential homes
 - 10 were with fostering for adoption placements or with their adoptive families

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- 20 were in residential education, health, secure placement, or unregulated placement

11.3 The total number of children we care for who are black and of global majority is 23%, and the percentage of Portsmouth foster carers who are black and of global majority is 7%. We need to understand our foster carers ethnicity better in more detail, and try to target recruitment to increase our black and global majority carers.

12 Number of Children Needing Care

12.1 Access to Resources received a total of 555 referrals for children 2023/24, an increase from the total of 512 the previous year. Some of those children were already being cared for and needed a change of placement/carer, however there were a total of 197 of children needing to come into care. Not all those children became cared for with some remaining with the parent or staying with family members.

12.2 Table 2 illustrates the age bands of children referred needing care over the course of the year, the type of placement needed, and outcome of referral. The highest proportion of children needing foster families, either being referred from living at home or needing a change of carer continues to be the older cohort of 11-16 years. The second cohort are young sibling groups, including twins. Portsmouth has been successful in being able to match over half of our children with inhouse foster carers, and most of Portsmouth children remain living in stable fostering family homes.

Table 2

Children needing to be cared for			
Age Band	2021/ 2022	2022/23	2023/24
0 - 4 yrs.	86	150	147
5 - 10 yrs.	113	77	114
11 - 16 yrs.	155	227	223
17+ yrs.	75	58	69
Types of placements			
Parent and child	22	44	39
Siblings	63	62	67
New referral	161	201	197
Placement Change	134	130	200

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Respite referral	137	181	158
Outcome			
IFA	26	42	72
In House	271	287	286
Other*	141	181	174

*External residential, PCC children's home, parent/, referral withdrawn were age 11-19

12.4 Table 3 shows that the number of fostering households has remained consistently above 200 and over half of the children we care for over the year are placed with Portsmouth foster carers. Table 4 shows where children go after they leave their foster placement.

Table 3

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
No of foster carers households	211	214	237	220	225	232
No of children in care	493	468	381	387	389	402
No of children with PCC Carers	288	246	242	272	263	206
No of children with IFA Carers	60	58	31	40	42	47
No of children with Residential Carers	23	30	24	26	30	30
Remainder*	122	134	84	49	54	62

*Placed at home with parents, placed with prospective adoptive families, education/health/secure placements, alternative arrangements

Table 4

Year	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Children leaving care	151	198	209	128	162	158
No of children leaving care to SGO	12	10	12	8	11	16
No of children leaving care to adoption	15	26	17	18	13	18
No of children leaving care to return to parents	21	26	22	29	25	22
No of children leaving care - transferring to staying put arrangement with foster carers (data not collected prior to 2022/23)	-	-	-	-	25	18
Remainder*	103	136	158	73	74	74

12.3 Children needing a change of carer reflects a relatively low number of vulnerable children who have experienced significant trauma in their backgrounds and have

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complex issues which can be a challenge and not sustainable longer term for some carers. Matching children with suitable carers, those with the skills, experience, and resilience, does not necessarily equate with those carers available and offering to care at the time. Table 5 below illustrates there were 39 children with more than 3 foster family/ residential placement moves in the twelve month period. This highlights the complex backgrounds of some children with high support needs, and the shortage in availability of carers care equipped and in a position to offer the high level of support these children need. For some, the higher number of placements moves represents foster carers able to offer temporary care only which could range from one or more nights according to their availability. This instability is not good for children.

Table 5

Three of more placements in the last 12 months	
Number of placements	Children we care for
13	2
12	1
9	1
8	1
7	2
6	1
5	2
4	10
3	19
Total	39

13. Staying Put and Supported Lodgings

13.1 Some children who are settled and have been living with their foster families for some time may stay beyond the age of 18 years in a Staying Put arrangement. There were 43 Staying Put arrangements during 2023/24, with 18 of these being new arrangements. Such arrangements enable children in care to remain with their foster family up to the age of 25 years (if in full time education) as they prepare for independence. The increase in Staying Put arrangements reflects fostering families developing enduring relationships with the children they care for and continue to support them through to independence. This is clearly a positive, but results in a reduction in the number of care experienced young people leaving their foster family and moving to a supported lodgings carer meaning no new vacancies for foster children.

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13.2 Portsmouth supported lodgings carers offer semi-independent living to young adults between age 18 and 24 years old. There were seven approved supported lodgings providers in 2023/24.

13.3 Therefore, in terms of mainstream carers, including supported lodgings carers and connected carers there were a total of 72 new carer households for 2023/2024.

14. Connected Carers

14.1 When children come into care, we explore the potential for those children to live within their wider family first in the event of them not being able to return to live with parents.

14.2 For the period 2023/2024 a total of 103 assessments of connected persons were initiated. Within that cohort of family friends being assessed, there may be more than one family member considering caring for the child/ren and not all will go on to be approved either as connected carer or special guardian. Some family members withdrew, and some assessed as not suitable. Of the assessments completed this year there were 50 connected carer families formally approved as foster carers for related child/children and nine connected persons assessed and granted special guardianship orders for children. 12 Connected Carers resigned in the past year due to children either returning to parents or being granted special guardianship orders.

15. Concerns/Complaints/Allegations against carers

15.1 Complaints against carers can range from care standards not being met to allegations of abuse of a child.

15.2 There were 29 complaints made against carers regarding their care of children, with seven resulting in a review of their approval. Of those:

- The number of complaints/allegations increased from 18 to 29 for the year 2023/2024. The increase in allegations referred for a fostering household review reflects an increase in complaints and allegations nationally as identified by the Fostering Network and Foster Talk.
- The number of concerns and complaints regarding carers has increased over the course of this year and it may be reflective of the uncertainty, stress, pressures of the significant changes in living arrangements, relationships, employment and health and aftermath of the Covid pandemic, and the impact and challenges caring for children with complex issues.
- Nine fostering families were referred to the Fostering Panel due to continuing concerns regarding their standards of care.

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- The Fostering Service works closely with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) in order to ensure local safeguarding procedures are adhered to with all concerns/complaints and allegations made against foster carers. The children involved have access to an independent advocate and foster carers also have access to independent support when a concern/complaint/allegation is made.

16. Foster carer support and retention

- 16.1 The fostering support team is responsible for the supervision and support of all foster carers with a full-time social worker supervising an average of 20 fostering households. Carers have their own allocated supervising social worker visiting at least monthly to support the carer (Government timescales six weekly), and ensure they are meeting the child's needs. They will also undertake a minimum of one unannounced visit per year. In partnership with the carer, their social worker supports them to complete their statutory Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDS), and identify appropriate enhanced training and additional support they may need to enable them to meet children's needs. Working closely with children's social workers supervising social workers will identify any issues relating to the carer that may impact on placement stability and increase their support and arrange regular placement support meetings.
- 16.2 There are a range of support groups for foster carers throughout the year, for example a support group for carers of teenagers, carers of children seeking safety & asylum, and a parent and baby carer support group. There are also opportunities for carers to meet socially with each other and members of the team through foster carer lunches held termly. Foster carers can also be supported by our Foster Carer Mentors, highly skilled and experienced foster carers who will work alongside foster carers needing specific support offering guidance and support through a challenging period.
- 16.3 Our CAMHS team offers the carers therapeutic support group on a six weekly basis and will complement that through CAMHS consultations for individual carers and their supervising social workers when there is a specific need relating to the child they care for.
- 16.4 In addition, the Fostering Service provides an out of hours support line for carers, which means carers can speak directly with a member of the fostering team often preventing a crisis and the need for the carer to contact the overarching Hampshire Out of Hours Service. Feedback from the Hampshire Out of Hours service is positive as they receive fewer 'crisis' call from Portsmouth carers as our local support reduces situations escalating to crises.

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- 16.5 Foster carers can contribute to service development through the Foster Carer Liaison Group which meets bi-monthly. The Liaison Group comprises a core membership of foster carers who set the agenda, liaising with other carers to raise any issues or comments for service development, for example developing a formal carer mentoring scheme. The meeting is chaired by the Head of Service for Children We Care For with other staff representative members including the Service Lead Fostering, Service Lead for Building Your Futures, Service Lead for Service Quality Team, Participation Officer and Virtual School Head Teacher.
17. **Foster Carer Training**
- 17.1 Portsmouth Fostering Service offers a wide range of learning opportunities to all carers from the start of their journey in assessment starting with Skills to Foster training. The training pathway provides courses face to face, virtual and webinars daytime, evenings, and weekends.
- 17.2 All carers receive a copy of the training pathway and the annual training calendar. Additional learning opportunities are offered throughout the year as they become available such as webinars and workshops offered by Portsmouth Safeguarding Children Board and when appropriate, foster carers can join training with social workers. We also work closely with other specialist departments in Portsmouth to offer specialist medical training to carers such as tracheotomy etc. Carers can also join the National Association of Therapeutic Parenting which offers support in several ways: online learning, workshops and group sessions.
- 17.3 Carers training needs are identified through carer supervision and through wider service development. For example, Forming Good Attachments and the Trauma Informed Model of Care (TIMOC) delivered by our CAMHS colleagues provided to all carers. Our Virtual School takes the lead in Team Around The Child training for all carers. In 2022 to promote children we care for returning home, Supporting Positive Family Time and Strengthening Relationships was promoted and introduced to all carers.
- 17.4 Whilst we understand the training that our carers do on an individual basis (detailed in the carers supervision record), we do not currently have a recording system to report on the training that our carers undertake. This needs to be rectified for 2024/25.

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The table below is an illustration of the training available to all foster carers:

Table 6

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)
Allegations Complaints and Standards of Care Concerns
Basic Awareness of Children who Display (HSB) Harmful Sexual Behaviours
Caring for the Traumatized Child
Cultural Competencies in Looked After Children
De-Escalation Training for Foster Carers
Digital Parenting (Online Safeguarding)
Emergency Paediatric First Aid (Foster Care)
Exploitation Masterclass - Consider Your Language - Victim Blaming
Information Governance & GDPR
Introduction to Nonviolent Resistance (NVR)
Introduction to Safeguarding
Loss and Bereavement of Looked after Children
Non-Violent Restraint (NVR) advanced - Helping with anxiety
Preparation for Permanence
PREVENT
Promoting Attachment and Resilience in Looked After Children
Promoting Resilience and Happiness for Carers
Relationships and Sex Education
Reporting and Recording
Safer Care
Substance Use for Foster Carers
Supporting Positive Family Time and Strengthening Relationships
Team Around Your Portsmouth Child (TAPC)
Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDS)
Trauma Informed Model of Care (TIMOC)
Understanding Behaviour
Skills to Foster Training for Mainstream/Connected Carers

18. Mockingbird Model of Foster Care

- 18.1 The Mockingbird Model of Care initially launched in January 2021 has boosted retention and received excellent feedback from carers and children involved. Portsmouth continues to be the pioneer in the south coast embedding the

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Mockingbird model as part of the fostering service. Based on the principle of an extended family caring for children, one hub home fostering household leads and supports a network of up to 10 fostering families with a constellation, caring for up to a total of 18 children. Three of the constellations' new carers motivation to join Portsmouth was due to the feedback from Mockingbird. Portsmouth currently has five constellations. Feedback from some experienced and longstanding carers who were considering leaving fostering remained due to the support Mockingbird.

- 18.2 The constellations thrive on the relationships formed between the hub home carers and their diverse network of carers and children. The strong relationships promote mutual support, social and learning activities for the carers and most significantly, fosters positive outcomes for children we care for. Children can have sleepovers with the hub home carer when the carer might need a break, a teenager wants a break, or the child wants to spend time with another child who is living with the carer- promoting children's relationships.
- 18.3 As the strong relationships develop between the carers network there is a natural evolvement of the children forming friendships and engagement in social activities. Mockingbird also welcomes children's own family members enabling them to retain relationships with parents, siblings and those important to them. The strength of the diverse relationships and the mutual support led by the hub home carer within the constellation boosts resilience amongst the families, alleviating carers sense of isolation, practically and emotionally, and reduces the risk of placement breakdown. The research by the National Fostering Network in the recent National Independent Care Review identifies the extended family model of care as a key factor and opportunity to boost and sustain placement stability. Children who may be at risk of placement breakdown have been supported by the network, and siblings who cannot live directly with each other can be placed with carers within a constellation which supports their relationship.
- 18.4 The feedback from carers and children in care within Mockingbird has been consistently positive. The carers value the mutual support, the close relationships, and opportunities to have natural breaks without impacting negatively on the children. The feedback from children has been clear in that they enjoy the opportunity to have friends and be part of social group. Children within Mockingbird have been instrumental in feeding back their experience through participation in Children in Care Council that has helped influence the growth of Mockingbird in Portsmouth.
- 18.5 Portsmouth now has five constellations: north Portsmouth, central Portsmouth and Gosport/Fareham, and a further two were launched this year in Havant/Waterlooville and south Portsmouth.

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18.6 This model is a great example of co-production in terms of planning and service delivery. Our foster carer contribution to the development of children and family service is highly valued and there is carer representation on the Corporate Parenting Operational Board, the Children We Care For Virtual Education Service and Children We Care For Health Service.

18.7 The good success of Mockingbird based on relational practice has had a great impact on the service. Whilst Mockingbird is one type of care, not all carers wish to be within Mockingbird, and some are forming relationships with each other to provide support as a group or as pairs, with for example foster carers on Isle of Wight have a strong support group. There are other small groups of carers offering support to each other in geographical areas.

19. Conclusion and actions for the following year

19.1 Just over half of Portsmouth's children in care continue to be cared for by Portsmouth foster carers. It is important that the rate of foster carer recruitment is in line with the increase in number of children being cared for and that a diverse profile of carers are able to meet the complex needs of children affording children we care for safe, stable and nurturing fostering family home for as long as the child needs.

19.2 Whilst foster carer retention for Portsmouth is good there is a clear need to increase the number of foster carers able to be suitably matched with the increasing diverse number of children needing care. Portsmouth had a clear marketing strategy and recruitment indications for 2023/24 with a target to increase the number of fostering households being recruited to Portsmouth. Recruitment particularly focuses on carers for teenagers, siblings and unaccompanied children seeking safety & asylum.

Action 1) Have a greater understanding of our carers ethnicity and cultural profile.
Action: 2) Review of our marketing approach for foster carers to ensure that we are successfully attracting foster carers, and increasing our number of black and global majority carers.

19.2 The Government's initiative to centralise foster carer recruitment has begun and Portsmouth is part of the South East Regional Recruitment Hub comprising of 21 local authorities across the South East with a sub cluster comprising Portsmouth, Southampton, Hampshire and Isle of Wight who went live in July 2024. The premise of the regionalisation is based on the need to increase the number of people coming forward to care for children across the local authorities.

19.4 Currently across the south east there are 11,000 children needing foster families and a total of 3,000 foster families. Uniting together brings together the expertise of each local authority to create innovative recruitment campaigns and promote

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working together to reduce competition and provide equity in recruiting carers for all our children. We are mindful as a unitary authority amongst large local authorities' recruitment is complex and can be a challenge, but early indicators show there are good working relationships developing between the local authorities and there is close scrutiny to ensure we remain child focused to recruit foster families for all our children we care for.

Action: Continue to work collaboratively with the SE fostering hub.

- 19.5 The focus of foster carers support is to enable them to care for children who have experienced trauma. Trauma informed training will continue to be part of the mandatory training for carers and the fostering team.

Action: Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) training is being rolled out to the fostering service over the course of 2024.

- 19.6 The comprehensive training offered to foster carers needs to be reviewed regularly so that we can easily understand which foster carers have had what training.

Action: Learning and development department will be developing a system to record and report on carer training records and feedback, to inform carer and service learning needs.

- 19.7 Mockingbird offers a network of support that promotes a close fostering family for the carers and child that boosts placement stability. Learning from Mockingbird shows the Hub Home Carer needs to be available to their carers to support and sustain placement stability. Portsmouth has successfully launched five constellations over two years and the next 12 months will be focused on consolidating the model before reviewing the potential of further development in 2025.

- 19.8 Over the course of the past year there has been a cohort of children with very complex backgrounds who have experienced significant disruption with multiple short term placement moves often culminating in a move outside of the city, separating the child from their family, community and support around them and at high financial cost.

Action: For 2024/25 Portsmouth is proposing the development of a pilot for an intensive bridging foster placement to enable those children to spend a time limited period with specialist foster carers, linked with a multi-disciplinary team around them to work with the child and prepare them for moving on to their primary carer which could be home with parents, family member, foster family or children's home.

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19.9 The number of connected carers is increasing and those wishing to offer permanence to the child via special guardianship or adoption will be encouraged with the support they need in place.

Action: The connected persons team will be strengthened with an additional team member to boost the support available for connected /kinship carers.

19.10 Children's services are enhancing their work with parents to enable children to return home as part of the 'Going Home' work. That may be within or short period time or longer term. The Fostering Service is working closely with children's teams, and foster carers are being supported to work alongside children and their families to enable them to return home. There were a total of seven children returned home over the year and feedback from children's social workers and families has been positive in relation to foster carers supporting with the children to return.

19.11 In listening to the children we care for we and boost options for young people we care for, we are developing our supported lodgings service to enable young people aged 16 and 17 to live in those supported living arrangements.

Action: In order to achieve this the supported lodgings service will be applying to register with Ofsted.

19.12 As per the fostering panel chair report (appended to this report), it is acknowledged that more needs to be done to ensure that service developments and fostering panel feedback are effectively shared.

Action: The service will be introducing quarterly service and panel business meetings.

Signed by:

Sarah Daly
Director – Children, Families and Education (DCS)

Appendices:

Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

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The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location
Foster Panel Chair Report-Peter Crawhurst 23/24	Appendix 1