



**North Tyneside Council**

# **Fostering Strategy 2022-25**



October 2022

## Contents

Introduction	3
Aims and Objectives	4
National Context	5
North Tyneside Context	6
Our Ambitions	7
Our Plan	8
• Consult more widely and more often	8
• Pay more and pay differently	8
• Offer more and better support	10
• Make the Fostering role more visible and more accessible	11
• Offer more training to more skilled Carers	12
How we will know our Plan is working	14

## Introduction

North Tyneside Council has made a commitment to the children and young people of the Borough that it will only care for them when it has first worked tirelessly to keep them safe within their family home. We successfully deliver on this pledge day-in, day-out. Hundreds of children remain within their family home and connected to their community because of the help and support that the Council and its partners provide to make it safe for them to do so.

Sadly, sometimes it is necessary to move children and young people from their family home to live elsewhere in order to keep them safe. This is not a decision we take lightly. Children and young people have told us that carers known to them help to soften the impact of having to leave their own home. This is why we do all we can to place them in the care of someone known to them and part of their network. This also importantly, keeps them connected to their community. We also work incredibly hard to support carers to make their commitment to care for a child or young person a reality. At the current time there are over a 100 children helped in this way by the Council.

Unfortunately, sometimes it is not possible for family and friends around a child or young person to care for them. This is why Foster Carers play such an important part of what the Council does to safeguard children and young people. At any one time, approximately 100 children and young people are cared for by Foster Carers, people who open their homes to a child or young person in need of love and care. To us, they are true superheroes.

This ambitious strategy is all about supporting our Foster Carers and strengthening our pledge to ***recruit the right number of Foster Carers with the right skills for the children and young people who need our care***. Together we can, and will, make a difference.

Steven Phillips, Lead member for Children's Services

Julie Firth, Director of Children's Services

## Aims and Objectives

The key aims and objectives of this Strategy are as follows:

1. To increase the total number of local Foster Carers available for the children and young people of North Tyneside
2. To increase the number of Foster Carers with the skills to care for teenagers
3. To increase the number of Foster Carers with the skills to care for sibling groups
4. To improve the resilience of our Foster Carers through our support to them, reducing the number of fostering arrangements which break down
5. To cease the use of Independent Fostering Agency arrangements in emergency situations
6. Reduce the number of external Children's Home placements for children and young people in favour of placements with skilled Foster Carers

## National Context

- Most children in care are cared for in foster placements. 57,380 (71%) children in care on 31 March 2021 were in fostering households, an increase in numbers from 57,000 in 2020; 55,760 in 2019; and 55,200 in 2018
- There has been a shift in the profile of children coming into care, with a slight decline in the number of children under the age of 1 and over the age of 16;
- The largest age group of children who are now fostered are teenagers aged 10–15 years (39%);
- The ‘Staying Put’ initiative has also changed the profile of foster care, with a 19% of young people in foster care turning 18 and still living with their former foster carer;
- The children and young people entering care do so with ever more complex difficulties including serious physical and mental health problems and developmental problems;
- Local Authorities have faced increasing problems recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of Foster Carers, particularly for those who require specialist placements. As a result there has been a significant use of and growth in Independent Fostering Agencies;
- Independent Fostering Agencies are 5 times more successful at recruiting than Local Authorities;
- There is estimated to be a national shortage of 9,300 Fostering Households, within this North East, which equates to a shortage of 580 household – demand is outstripping supply. This is a shortage increase nationally of 3,400 Fostering households since 2018;
- The lack of Foster Carers means that matching – the decision which Foster Carers are best able to meet the needs of a child or young person – is overwhelmingly supply led and not needs led;

## North Tyneside Context

- Over the past 5 years, the number of children in the care of North Tyneside Council has remained relatively stable. The number is however higher (80 per 10,000) than the national average (64 per 10,000), though lower than all but one of the North East Local Authorities;
- The children and young people that have entered our care have more complex difficulties including serious physical and mental health problems and developmental problems;
- Over the last 5 years the number of Foster Carers we have approved as our local carers have reduced;
- The age profile of our carers is increasing, with a number planning to retire in the near future;
- We have a particular need for Foster Carers skilled at caring for teenagers;
- We have a need for more Foster Carers who are skilled at caring for sibling groups;
- We recruit in an increasingly competitive market place for new Foster Carers, with other Local Authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies actively recruiting, some offering higher fees and allowances;
- The average cost of an Independent Fostering Agency placement is three times higher than that of a North Tyneside Foster Carer;
- Some children and young people placed in a Children's Home could be placed with skilled Foster Carers were such carers available;
- Our lack of Foster Carers means that matching – the decision which Foster Carers are best able to meet the needs of a child or young person – is not always as needs led as it could be

## Our Ambitions

Within 3 years we will:

- No longer use any Independent Fostering Agency placements in emergency situations
- Recruit an additional 30 Fostering Households, of which 10 will offer specialist placements for teenagers or sibling groups
- Place 90% of our children in care with our own local Foster Carers, keeping them connected to their community
- Place 80% of sibling groups together

## Our Plan

### **Consult more widely and more often**

We acknowledge that we have not consulted with our Fostering Community as often as we should have done in the past. The development of this Strategy is evidence of our commitment to change. We have worked in partnership with the Fostering Community to develop our plan, listening closely to what our Foster Carers have told us. We will in future ensure that we meaningfully and genuinely co-produce the best possible way forward.

We will:

- Increase our use of surveys to Foster Carers to ensure the collective voice of our Fostering Community is heard and their views and experiences understood;
- Increase the range of Foster Care Support Groups so that our Fostering Community has a representative voice on issues affecting particular aspects of the role;
- Ensure that Leaders and Managers of the Fostering Service meet regularly and in different forums with as many of our Fostering Community as possible so that we make full use of our Foster Carers' experiences and ideas to develop the best possible service for children and young people;
- Undertake regular reviews of the progress of this Strategy so that it delivers in the way we all intended it to;
- Consult on the development of the next Strategy in two years' time so our Fostering Community remains central to our Service Planning.

### **Pay more and pay differently**

We will retain our payment structure, having simplified some elements and enhancing others. We will make it more transparent.

We will:



- Retain the Payment for Skills structure with three payment bands linked to competency, skills and training: 'Accredited', 'Advanced' and 'Specialist';
- Align the allowances we pay to carers to the recommended National Minimum levels and ensure these are raised in line with annual increases in order that we do not fall behind;
- Continue to pay our carers the fee we have in place for caring for 3 or more children and increase this to include carers caring for 2 or more children;
- Remove inconsistencies in additional fees paid to Accredited carers who receive the Teen fee by simplifying the allowances to align with national minimum levels
- Continue to pay the full amount Carers are required to pay in Council Tax for having spare rooms available in their home (the 'bedroom tax');
- Commit to review the payments on an annual basis to ensure we pay our Carers an amount which is fair and competitive in an ever-changing marketplace.

## **Offer more and better support**

Our Fostering Community does an extraordinary job welcoming into their homes, their families and their lives some of the most vulnerable children and young people in the Borough. They do so with warmth, skill and good humour and regularly show remarkable resilience and tenacity that goes way beyond the extra-mile. We have carers that advocate, care for and love the children and young people placed with them as if they were their own and in so doing provide the best possible homes for children in care to grow up in. We know however, that occasionally, the Fostering role can be overwhelming, frustrating, sometimes too much or even scary. We know it is at this point that we need to provide high quality, effective and meaningful support.

We will:

- Replace the Foster Carer Advice and Support telephone service with more effective support;
- Launch Mockingbird; a model of foster care which replicates an extended family, offering support from experienced foster carers 24/7 in order to increase stability of care arrangements for children, and support to carers;
- Continue to offer our Fostering Community the opportunity for less experienced Carers to 'buddy' more experienced carers for peer advice, support and mentoring;
- Continue our Foster Care Support Groups within the Borough, recognising the diversity of our Fostering Community;
- Provide specialist support to our Fostering Community from the Health, Information and Advice, Virtual School and Emotional Wellbeing Team (HIVE Team) including:
  - Attachment Training;
  - Theraplay;
  - Counselling;
  - Behaviour Management Strategies;
  - Therapeutic parenting
- Enhance our training offer to our Fostering Community with a particular focus on equipping Carers to meet the needs of children and young people with complex additional social, emotional and mental health needs;
- Launch our HIVE counselling clinic for foster carers to support with vicarious trauma
- Provide an EASE Card enabling our Fostering Community themselves to access local facilities such as libraries and leisure centres at a reduced rate;
- Negotiate with providers of leisure activities within the Borough possible reductions in costs for our Fostering Community;
- A commitment to explore best practice models and approaches.

### **Make the Fostering role more visible and more accessible**

We are aware that other providers of Foster Care within the North East have raised their public profile through media campaigns in recent years in order to support their

recruitment in an increasingly competitive marketplace for prospective Foster Carers. North Tyneside has not been as proactive in raising its profile as it could have been and this has, in part, been reflected in the numbers of Foster Carers applying to join our Fostering Community. We are therefore committed to trying new things and doing things differently than we have done before.

We will:

- Have a dedicated annual budget allocated to the Fostering Service to support marketing activities. The Fostering Service will use this budget to purchase short films developed in collaboration with other Local Authorities to share on social media, job fayres and television
- Continue with:
  - Advertising on local radio;
  - Advertising on Social media;
  - Advertising through the placement of Banners in public areas within the Borough
  - Advertising through the distribution and display of Posters and Post Cards in public areas within the Borough
- Continue to use North Tyneside Council communications to residents;
- Work with partner agencies such as Police, Health and Education to raise awareness of the Fostering role and recruitment through the development of a 'toolkit' of messages and images that can be used;
- Increase the number of 'Information Evening' Events held by the Fostering Service;
- Refresh our 'Information Packs' to ensure they are attractive, informative and represent the high ambitions we have for children and young people in care;
- Target the employees of the Council's key 'neighbours' on the Cobalt Business Park and large employers within the Borough with awareness raising literature;
- Attend an increased number of key community, Borough and regional events such as the Mouth of Tyne Festival with awareness raising 'stalls';

- Produce video stories related to the role and experience of our Foster Carers and care-experienced young people to raise awareness. These videos will be shared on the North Tyneside Council website, social media channels and used at information evenings;
- Improve the Fostering Service web-content on the North Tyneside Council Website, regularly updating with marketing campaign key messages;
- Launch an Online Expression of Interest Form on the North Tyneside Council website, improving the accessibility of the Fostering Service;
- Increase the responsiveness of the Fostering Service to Expressions of Interest;
- Better understand the experience of the journey of assessment to approval by Foster Carers through the use of interview and survey;
- Evaluate what works and what does not as we go along.

## **Offer more training to more skilled Carers**

We have worked closely with our Fostering Community. They have strongly influenced what our training offer will be. The result is that our offer will be more frequent, more accessible and cover a broader range of skills. We will also specifically focus on those within our Fostering Community who are interested in developing and strengthening their skills to care for more complex young people and teenagers.

We will:

- Continue to maintain a dedicated Training post within the Fostering Service;
- Provide a greater range of times and venues for the delivery of training to our Fostering Community, improving accessibility;
- We will work harder to meet the individual circumstances of Foster Carers to enable them to access training, including the provision of alternative care for a child or young person;
- Broaden the providers of our training, with increased participation from HIVE, CAMHs, Youth Justice, Education Psychology and others

- Offer a minimum of 8 development sessions per year that can be accessed by our Foster Carers

## How we will know if our Plan is working

This Strategy is deliberately ambitious. We know there is a lot more to do. We want to:

- Consult more widely and more often
- Pay more and pay differently
- Offer better support
- Make the Fostering role more visible and more accessible
- Offer more training to more skilled Carers

Each of these elements of our plan has a range of outputs that can be counted – how many Fostering Support Groups we have, how many likes on our Fostering Service Facebook page – data like this will form a part of our understanding about whether our plan is working and on the right track. However, we will not lose sight of the focus of all our activity, the Aims of the Strategy. The following four questions will be key:

- How many Independent Fostering Agency care arrangements have we used
- How many additional Fostering Households have we recruited
- What percentage of our children in care are placed with our own local Foster Carers
- What percentage of sibling groups have we been able to place together

Of course, our Strategy will not be a success if our Fostering Community – our heroes – does not feel that the difference we are trying to achieve has improved their own experience of the Fostering role. We will be asking them on a regular basis how they think we are doing.

Finally, the success of this Strategy should mean that children and young people have the right care at the right time in the right place with the right carers. This Strategy is all about them. We will be asking our children and young people in care how they think we are doing.