

**TITLE OF REPORT:** North East Fostering Pathfinder

**REPORT OF:** Helen Fergusson, Strategic Director, Children's Social Care and Lifelong Learning

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### **Purpose of the report**

1. The purpose of this report is to update Cabinet on the work of the North East Fostering Pathfinder project and to seek approval for sign up to the regional collaboration agreement.

### **Background**

2. The North East region has agreed to lead a two-year Department for Education (DFE) fostering pathfinder pilot project, which is a key part of the response to the government's implementation plan following the national Care Review, published in 2022. The aim of the project is to improve recruitment and retention of foster carers and improve outcomes for children in care across the region.
3. The DFE has invested in the pilot to support a regional support hub and a regional recruitment and marketing campaign.
4. Together for Children, Sunderland are leading the project on behalf of the region and have appointed a project manager and service lead. A project board has been established with representation from all North East local authorities and sub groups established focusing on communications, data and the roll out of further Mockingbird hubs to support the retention of foster carers in local areas.
- 3 The pathfinder has three elements:
  - a regional support hub, which will aim to improve the prospective foster carer journey from enquiry to application and approval;
  - a regional recruitment campaign supported by the DFE and targeted to meet the specific needs of the region including UASC; those with complex needs and teenagers
  - retention support for foster carers through the expansion of the Mockingbird model.
- 4 Each Local Authority will retain the responsibilities as the statutory fostering agency to assess and approve any potential carers within their local area and this is not within the scope of the pilot.

- 5 The co-design work for the support hub is underway and work has taken place to map the current service user journeys of prospective foster carers in each local authority. The support hub is expected to be fully operational by September 2023 at which point a regional communications campaign will be launched. Fostering marketing material will be standardised for the region as part of the pilot but with the flexibility to customise this at a local level for specific local campaigns.
- 6 The intention is for the learning from the pilot to inform wider system roll out nationally.

## **Conclusion**

7. The intended outcomes of the project include:
  - Increased number of foster carer enquiries in the region;
  - Increased number of prospective foster carers completing application within 1 Year;
  - More competitive foster carer fees/reduced reliance on Independent Fostering;
  - Reduced inappropriate use of residential homes;
  - Increased stability of children living with foster carers / fewer moves for Children;
  - Fewer children being moved out of area: more children and young people able to retain and build upon relationships with friends, family and social workers in their local area, leading to reduced placement costs;
  - Fewer instances of children missing from their foster home
  - Increased number of foster carers able to meet identified sufficiency needs within the region
  - Improved retention of foster carers through delivery of Mockingbird Programmes
8. All Local Authorities in the region have worked collaboratively to develop this proposal and the collaboration agreement attached lays out the basis on which the region will work together over the next two years to deliver this project.

## **Recommendation**

9. Cabinet is recommended to agree to the Council signing up to the regional collaboration agreement.

For the following reason:

To improve recruitment and retention of foster carers and improve outcomes for children in care across the region.

**Policy Context**

1. The proposal supports the Council's Thrive Pledges and the aims of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and will support the Council's Sufficiency Strategy.

**Consultation**

2. The Cabinet Members for Children and Young People have been consulted.

**Alternative Options**

3. The alternative option is not to participate in the Project and sign up to the regional collaboration agreement.

**Implications of Recommended Option**

4. **Resources:**
  - a) **Financial Implications** – The Strategic Director, Resources and Digital confirms there are no financial implications arising from this report. The DfE are investing in this project.
  - b) **Human Resources Implications** – None
  - c) **Property Implications** - None
5. **Risk Management Implication** - None
6. **Equality and Diversity Implications** - None
7. **Crime and Disorder Implications** – None
8. **Health Implications** - None
9. **Climate Emergency and Sustainability Implications** - None
10. **Human Rights Implications** - None
11. **Ward Implications** - None