

**Divisions Affected – N/A**

## **DELEGATED DECISIONS BY CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

**16 September 2025**

### **Extension of the South Central Independent Fostering Agencies Framework**

#### **Report by Director of Children's Services**

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The Cabinet Member is **RECOMMENDED** to:

- a) **Approve the option to extend the South Central Independent Fostering Agency (SC-IFA) Framework for an extended period of 1 year (1<sup>st</sup> April 2026-31<sup>st</sup> March 2027).**

## **Executive Summary**

1. To approve the option to extend the current framework for a further year from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2026 to the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2027.
  - The SC-IFA Framework was renewed in 2021, with its current term spanning from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2026, and an option for an extension of up to two years available.
  - The SC IFA Partnership Agreement includes 16 local authorities and sets out a framework for procuring Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements in the region.
  - Oxfordshire County Council has participated in the South-Central Independent Fostering Agency (SC-IFA) Framework for several years. Management of the framework was originally under Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, but responsibility transferred to Southampton City Council on 1 January 2024 after changes in management and a joint agreement among partner authorities.
  - Southampton City Council is requesting a one-year contract extension under current terms while talks continue with the Southeast Regional Care Co-operative about long-term framework management.

## Background

2. The South Central Independent Fostering Agency Framework (SC\_IFA) was renewed in 2021, with its current term spanning from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2026, and an option for an extension of up to two years available.
3. The SC IFA Partnership Agreement includes 16 local authorities and sets out a framework for procuring Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements in the region, as managed by brokerage officers.
4. The framework is divided into four LOTS/Categories:
  - Standard placements
  - Disability placements
  - Parent & Child placements
  - Enhanced placements
5. Oxfordshire County Council has partnered in the South-Central Independent Fostering Agency (SC-IFA) Framework for many years. Originally managed by Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council, responsibility shifted to Southampton City Council on 1 January 2024 following changes in management and a joint decision by partner authorities.
6. Southampton City Council is seeking a one-year extension of the contract under the existing terms and conditions while discussions with the Southeast Regional Care Co-operative about the long-term management of the framework are ongoing.
7. The continuation on the framework will maintain service continuity, market stability, and placement quality and sufficiency for vulnerable young people.
8. Each South Central Independent Fostering Agency placement is priced according to an annual rate card per LOT or is pre-determined for off contract placements. Upon confirmation of a framework placement, the agreed price remains fixed for the duration of the contract, as there is currently no mechanism for annual price adjustments. Off contract placements may be subject to an annual uplift under most circumstances, typically initiated by the provider; however, the specific increase is determined through agreement between the local authority and the IFA, generally becoming effective from the following April.
9. Annual inflation (fixed maximum percentage) adjustments are agreed upon starting in September for new placements made from 1<sup>st</sup> April of the following year.

10. Each local authority is required to pay an annual single management fee of £1095 and quarterly costs that reflect proportional usage and core costs under the framework, typically ranging from £4,000 to £5,000 each quarter.
11. This framework includes a fully compliant list of providers with fixed prices for placements, ensuring price stability throughout the contract duration. The framework facilitates the purchasing of individual placements from providers on a call off basis, rather than through a block contract arrangement.

## **Corporate Policies and Priorities**

12. The proposed Approved Provider List incorporates two of the key priorities set out by the Start Well Commissioning Team and aligns with three of the priorities set out in the Council's Corporate Plan, as below:

### Priorities of the Start Well Commissioning Team

- increase number of children placed in county.
- Improve access to services to reduce inequality.

### Priorities of the Corporate Plan.

- Priority 3 - Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents.
- Priority 7 - Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.
- Priority 9 - Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefits.

To achieve the priorities set out above and to address the gaps identified in the Sufficiency Strategy, the Start Well HESC team are working with operational colleagues in Health, Social Care and Education on the following:

- OCC will work positively and collaboratively with existing and potential providers to develop a range of appropriate provision to meet the needs of Oxfordshire's children within County (ensuring access to services, continuity of schooling, maintenance of support networks).
- OCC will share what we are learning about our children's needs and features through the Valuing Care needs assessment tool, to identify what is needed from the local market to support those needs and that the needs assessment tool needs updating more regularly following the original placement request.

## **Vision and Strategic Objectives**

The Oxfordshire Children and Young People's Plan (2018-2023)<sup>1</sup> outlines a

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<sup>1</sup> [Oxfordshire Children and Young People's Plan](#)

vision to make Oxfordshire a great place for children and young people to grow up in and to have the opportunity to become everything they want to be'. To achieve this, our strategic objectives are:

<p><b>Be Successful</b> To ensure children have the best start in life; ensure they have access to high quality education, employment and motivational training; go to school feeling inspired to stay and learn; and have good self-esteem and faith in themselves.</p>	<p><b>Be Happy and Healthy</b> Services are available to promote good health and prevent ill health; learn the importance of healthy, secure relationships and having a support network; have access to services to improve overall wellbeing, and easy ways to get active.</p>
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## Financial Implications

The financial implications section should be completed by a member of the finance service

13. A revenue budget has been established for Independent Fostering purchases; detailing expenditure related to both the South-Central Framework and SPOT providers. The following table presents the expenditure for 2024-2025 along with comparative usage data for the same period.

Table1: Spend and usage 2024/2025

2024-2025	Figures	Percentage of Spend		Breakdown of usage	Comment
South Central Spend	6,617,205.00	60	%	76% usage	More for Less
SPOT Spend	4,446,711.00	40	%	24% usage	Less for more
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11,063,916.00</b>				
Framework usage costs	18,900.00				
Other Misc	17,204.00				
Overall Spend	<b>11,100,020.00</b>				
<b>Budget</b>	<b>10,019,600.00</b>				

<b>Variance/Overspend</b>	<b>1,080,420.00</b>				

Data has been analysed and demonstrates regular use and benefits of finding placements via the framework.

Table 2: Oxfordshire's usage to date.

Contract year & quarter	Number of South-Central placements	Number of SPOT placements	Total IFA usage	Percentage of South-Central placements
Year 1 Q1	207	53	260	80%
Year 1 Q2	219	51	270	81%
Year 1 Q3	212	59	271	78%
Year 1 Q4	211	53	264	80%
<b>Average use for year 1 per Quarter 22-23</b>	<b>212.25</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>266.25</b>	<b>80%</b>
Year 2 Q1	209	48	257	81%
Year 2 Q2	200	45	245	82%
Year 2 Q3	190	44	234	81%
Year 2 Q4	189	40	229	83%
<b>Average use for year 2 per quarter 23-24</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>44.25</b>	<b>241.25</b>	<b>82%</b>
Year 3 Q1	192	42	234	82%
Year 3 Q2	178	58	236	75%
Year 3 Q3	196	65	261	75%
Year 3 Q4	191	69	260	73%
<b>Average use for year 3 per quarter 24-25</b>	<b>189.25</b>	<b>58.5</b>	<b>247.75</b>	<b>76%*</b>
Year 4 Q1 25-26	206	69	275	75%

\*There is a slight decline in usage observed in Year 3 and the beginning of Year 4, primarily because several providers have withdrawn from the contract due to the uplift clause not applying to existing placements.

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## Legal Implications

- The Council's powers and duties to purchase fostering services are set out at Part III of the National Assistance Act 1948, the Care Act 2014, the Children and Families Act 2017 and the Children Act 1989.

Southampton City Council undertook the original procurement exercise to set up the framework arrangements as lead commissioner and is the purchasing

contracting party in the existing framework agreement. Such procurement exercise was conducted in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 (as amended).

Although the Council is a named purchaser in the framework agreement it is not a party to that agreement and has no contractual obligation to use the framework. This will also be true for any extension of the framework agreement.

The only contractual commitment for the Council arising from the extension of the framework agreement and the ancillary access agreement is the Council's financial obligation to pay the administration fees to Southampton City Council in accordance with such access agreement (as set out at paragraph 11 above).

The extension of the framework agreement will permit the Council to continue to lawfully purchase fostering services under call-off contracts provided suppliers are selected in accordance with the procedures set out in the framework agreement.

The use of the framework agreement by the Council reduces the Council's reliance on direct award spot contracting. Such spot contracting is by its nature neither competitive nor fair and, when aggregated, runs the risk of breaching procurement rules.

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## **Equality & Inclusion Implications**

15. The Independent Fostering Agency Providers commit to providing inclusive and equal services to a diverse range of children and young people, and to promote equality and diversity as part of their recruitment and employment practices (including staff, potential staff, children or foster carers) on the basis of a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2020.

All Independent Fostering Agencies encourage children to develop respect for themselves and for others.

All Independent Fostering Agencies deliver services that recognise and build on the strengths of children and young people from all cultures, religions, gender, age sexual orientation, ability and backgrounds in ways that meet their needs and help them to achieve their full potential.

All Independent Fostering Agencies ensure children are given the opportunity to be cared for and educated in order to develop their full potential.

All children are encouraged and supported to understand their rights and be well-informed about ways to challenge discrimination.

All Independent Fostering Agencies ensure that children are cared for with foster carers who have been suitably trained in all aspects of equality and diversity including legislation and their responsibilities.

## Sustainability Implications

- Independent Fostering Agencies ensure sustainability by adopting strategies to minimise their environmental impact, such as reducing waste and utilising sustainable resources. Creating nurturing environments that are resource efficient, ensuring that every aspect of foster care aligns with sustainability principles. They also encourage involving the community and fostering relationships. These practices not only contribute to sustainability but also prepare children for a future where environment consciousness is increasingly important.

## Risk Management

- If the Council do not continue as a partner on the South Central Independent Fostering Agency Framework, it will face additional financial pressures. Legally, we are required to provide suitable foster homes for most children we care for. Without this approval, the Council would continue using Independent Fostering Agencies on an off framework basis, which is less cost-effective and offers less control over fees and annual inflation increases.

### 1. Options Appraisal

The preferred option is option 2.

	OPTIONS	BENEFITS	RISKS	MITIGATION
1.	Do Nothing – Allow the framework to continue without Oxfordshire being on the framework – end date would be 31.03.2026	We would not have to pay the one off and quarterly fees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If the authority decides not to participate in the framework and withdraws, the cost and number of off framework placements will increase.</li> </ul>	Continue to work closely with providers to ensure that OCC remains their preferred LA when considering placements. To broker comparative rates to ensure best value.
2.	Continue to be part of the framework for an additional year.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fixed prices for a set period</li> <li>Compliant providers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Extending the contract under the same conditions may lead to some</li> </ul>	Risk is reduced due to great working relationships with many

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centralised contract management instead of 16 separate contracts</li> <li>• Information sharing among authorities</li> <li>• Non-negotiable prices, except for LOT 4, which has specific parameters and conditions</li> </ul>	providers withdrawing due to the uplift clause not covering existing placements.	providers on the framework, and those who have already come off of the framework.
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