

# Fostering Service Annual Report

1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025

**Fostering** in  
**Oxfordshire**



OXFORDSHIRE  
COUNTY COUNCIL

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**April 2025**

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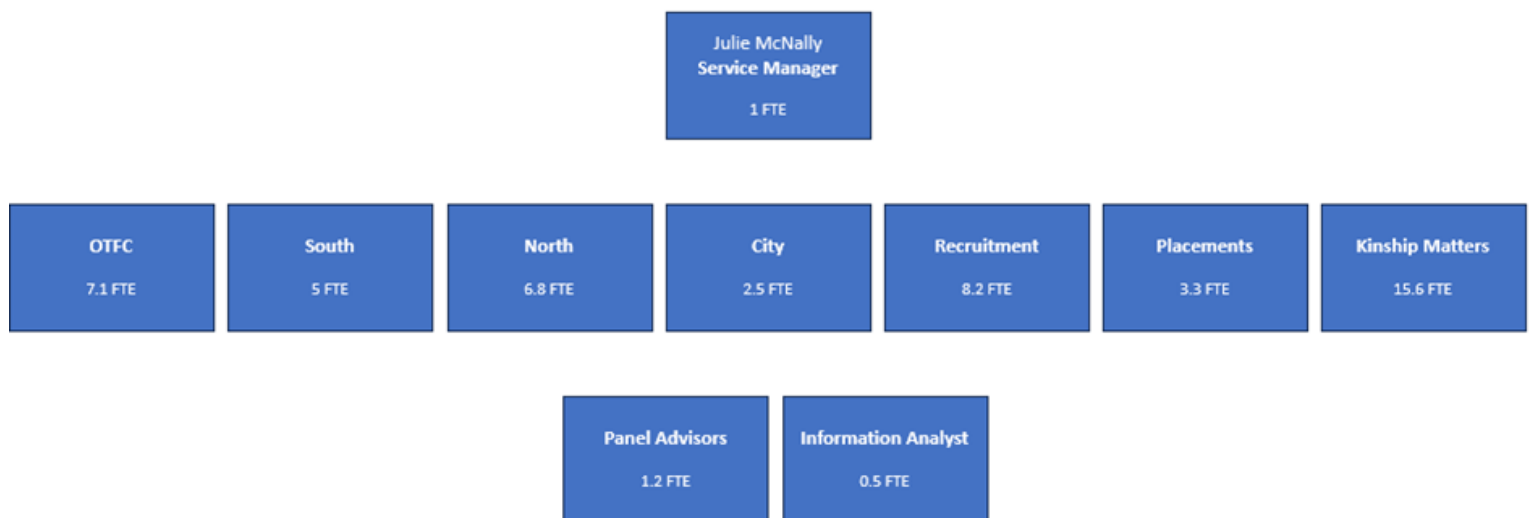
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## Introduction

This report will detail the work undertaken by Oxfordshire County Council Fostering Service from April 2024 to March 2025.

## Fostering Service Structure

The Fostering Service is managed under County Services. The Service Manager is Julie McNally.



## Fostering Service Overview

The Fostering Service provides and oversees fostering arrangements for Children We Care For across Oxfordshire. Our central commitment is to ensure that every child in our care experiences the same love, stability, and guidance that a good parent would offer their own child.

We deliver a county-wide service encompassing the recruitment, assessment, training, and supervision of foster carers. We are dedicated to ensuring that all carers meet national minimum standards and demonstrate the required childcare competencies. Alongside mainstream fostering, the service also undertakes Initial Viability Assessments (IVAs), kinship assessments, and special guardianship assessments.

As part of our development plan in the last financial year, we introduced two new teams: the Kinship Matters Team and the Placements Team. These additions reflect our ongoing commitment to strengthening support for children and carers across the county.

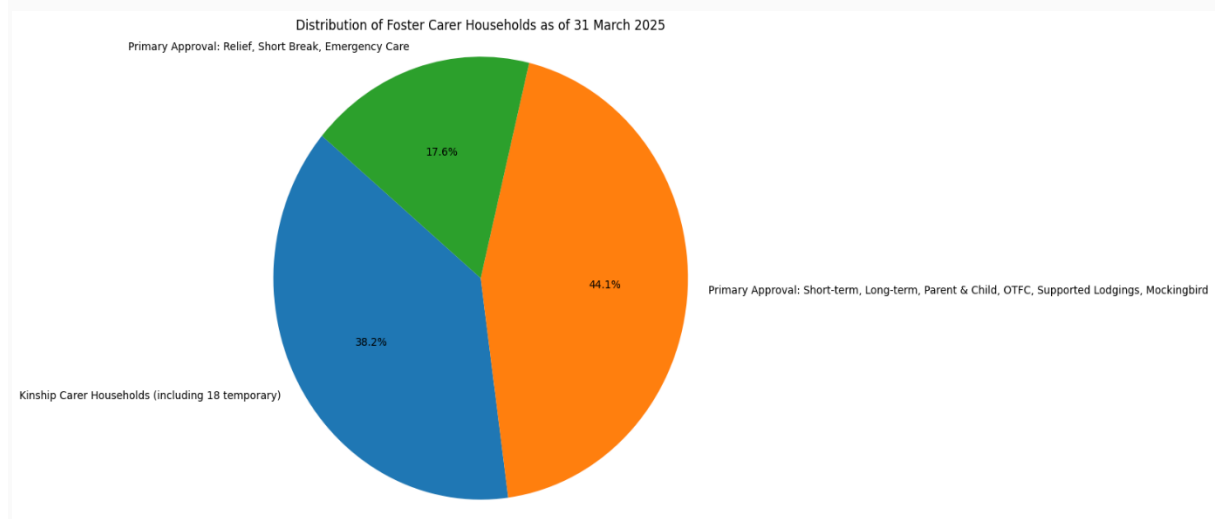
## Fostering Statistics (24/25)

The Fostering Service set an ambitious target to increase the net number of foster carer households by **20**.

As of **31 March 2025**, the Fostering Service was supporting a total of **238 foster carer households**, comprising:

- **91 kinship carer households**, including **18 with temporary approval**
- **105 households** with a primary approval type of **short-term, long-term, parent & child, OTFC, Supported Lodgings, or Mockingbird**
- **42 households** with a primary approval of **relief, short break, or emergency care**

These figures reflect the breadth of provision across the service and the continued commitment to supporting a diverse range of fostering arrangements.

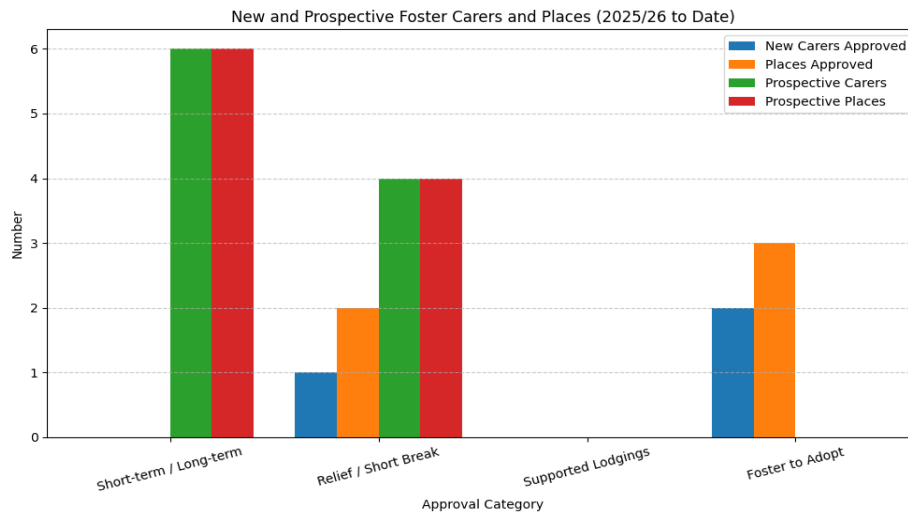


## Foster Carers approved 2024/25:

	No of Carers	No of beds Approved for
Short-term / long-term	4	6
Relief / Short Break	8	12
Supported Lodgings	3	3
Foster to Adopt	4	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>27</b>

## New Foster Carers approved to date 2025/26

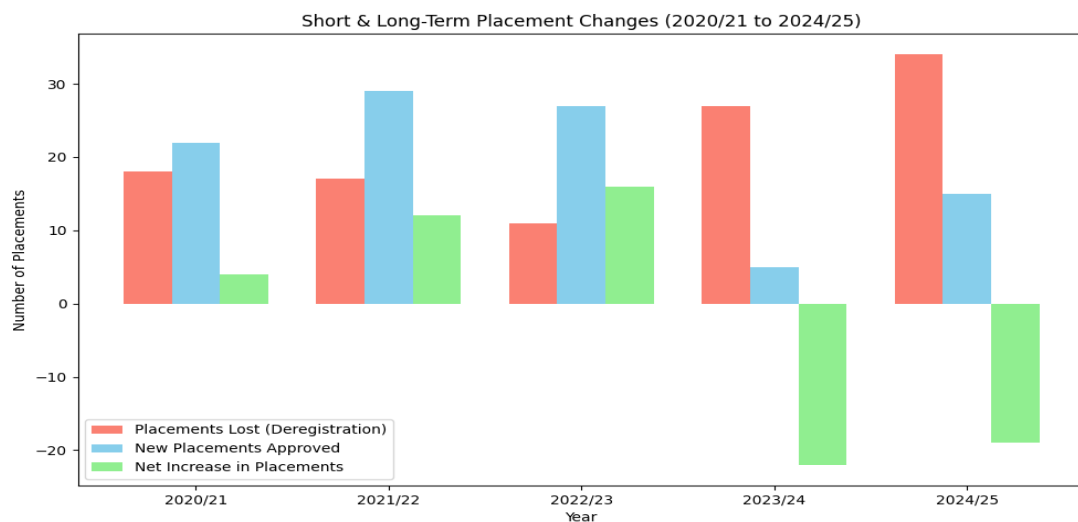
Since 1 April 2025 we have recruited the following new Foster Carers:



The visual highlights:

- **3 new carers** approved so far, providing **5 beds**
- **10 prospective carers** under assessment, potentially offering **10 additional beds**
- Most current and prospective approvals are in **short-term/long-term** and **relief/short break** categories.

## Short & Long-term placements (excludes relief and short break)



\*Carers actively offering short term placements post Jan 2020

\*\* Includes new placements from existing foster carers

## Summary of Challenges and Implications

### Challenges

- **Placement Losses:** The number of placements lost due to carer deregistration has increased significantly, peaking at **34 in 2024/25**.
- **Recruitment Shortfall:** New placements approved have not kept pace with losses in recent years, resulting in a **net decrease** of placements in both 2023/24 and 2024/25.
- **Placement Gaps:** There are insufficient in-house placements for:
  - Adolescents
  - Sibling groups
  - Parent and child arrangements
  - Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children
  - Children with disabilities (including short breaks)

### Strategic Focus Areas

- **Targeted Recruitment:** Prioritise recruitment of carers for underrepresented placement types.
- **Retention Initiatives:** Strengthen support and retention strategies to reduce deregistration rates.
- **Placement Matching:** Improve matching processes to optimise use of existing carers.
- **Specialist Programmes:** Expand training and support for carers willing to take on complex placements.

Here is a summary of the **reasons for deregistration** among carers offering short or long-term placements:

Reason	Percentage
Personal circumstances	41%
Standards of care	23%

Reason	Percentage
Retirement	9%
Moved out of county	9%
Became Shared Lives carers for foster child	9%
Placement breakdown	5%
Health circumstances	4%

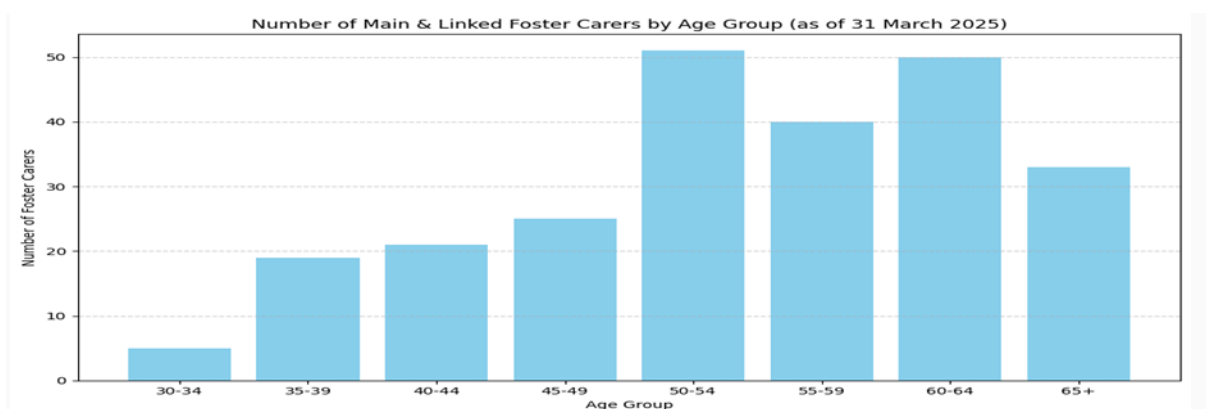
The most common reason was **personal circumstances**, accounting for **41%** of deregistration's, followed by **standards of care** at **23%**.

- **33 additional carers** are needed to meet the national average.
- The aim would be to provide **52 more in-house placements**, helping to address current shortfalls in areas such as adolescent care, sibling groups, parent and child placements, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and children with disabilities.

### Foster Carer Age Profile

As of 31 March 2025, there were **244 main and linked foster carers** actively supporting children and young people. The age distribution reflects a mature and experienced workforce, with most carers aged **50 and above**:





- The largest age group is **50–54 years**, representing **51 carers**.
- This is closely followed by the **60–64** age group with **50 carers**, and the **55–59** group with **40 carers**.
- Carers aged **65 and over** account for **33 individuals**, highlighting the continued contribution of older carers.
- In contrast, younger age groups are less represented, with only **5 carers aged 30–34** and **19 aged 35–39**.

This age profile underscores the importance of **targeted recruitment strategies** to attract younger carers and ensure long-term sustainability of the fostering workforce. It also highlights the value of retaining experienced carers while planning for future succession.

## Kinship Carer Age Profile

As of 31 March 2025, there were **114 main and linked kinship foster carers**. The age distribution shows a broad range, with a notable concentration in older age groups:

- The largest group is carers aged **65 and over**, totalling **25**.
- This is followed by:
  - **55–59 years**: 20 carers
  - **50–54 years**: 16 carers
  - **60–64 years**: 15 carers
- Younger age groups are less represented, with only **1 carer aged 20–24** and **3 aged 25–29**.

## Analysis & Implications for kinship

- **Older Age Profile**: Over half of kinship carers (76 out of 114) are aged 50 or older. This reflects the common pattern of grandparents or older relatives stepping in to care for children within their extended family.
- **Sustainability Concerns**: The high proportion of older carers may present future challenges in terms of:
  - **Placement stability** as carers age
  - **Health-related support needs**
  - **Succession planning** for long-term care

- **Underrepresentation of Younger Carers:** The low number of kinship carers under 35 suggests a need to explore:
  - Barriers to younger family members taking on kinship roles
  - Targeted support or incentives for younger kinship carers
- **Support Planning:** Tailored support packages may be needed for older carers, including:
  - Respite care
  - Health and mobility adaptations
  - Financial planning and legal support

## Ageing Workforce Analysis

As of 31 March 2025, **34% of both mainstream and kinship foster carers are aged 60 or over**. This includes:

- **83 carers** aged 60+ across both groups
  - **Mainstream carers:** 50 aged 60–64, 33 aged 65+
  - **Kinship carers:** 15 aged 60–64, 25 aged 65+

This demographic trend presents a **significant strategic risk** to the stability and sustainability of the fostering service.

## Implications

- **Imminent Retirements:** A substantial portion of the carer base may retire within the next 5–10 years, leading to a potential loss of experience and placement capacity.
- **Placement Vulnerability:** Long-term and complex placements may be disrupted if older carers exit the service without sufficient replacements.
- **Increased Support Needs:** Older carers may require additional health, mobility, or respite support to continue fostering safely and effectively.

## Strategic Response

- **Prioritise Recruitment:** Focus on attracting younger carers (ages 30–50) through targeted campaigns, flexible fostering models, and employer partnerships.
- **Succession Planning:** Identify placements at risk due to carer age and develop contingency plans, including step-down roles or mentoring opportunities for older carers.
- **Retention Support:** Offer tailored support to older carers to extend their fostering journey, such as health checks, home adaptations, and recognition schemes.
- **Data Monitoring:** Regularly review age profiles and retirement trends to inform recruitment targets and workforce planning.

## Comparison ages of children placed in-house and IFA

Here's a comparison of the **ages of children placed in In-House Foster Placements vs. Agency Foster Placements** as of 31 March 2025:

Age Group	In-House Placement	Foster	Independent Agency	Foster
Aged under 1	12		5	
Aged 1–4 years	20		33	
Aged 5–9 years	24		52	
Aged 10–15 years	58		113	
Aged 16+	22		43	
<b>Total</b>	<b>136</b>		<b>246</b>	

### Key Observations:

- **Agency Foster Placements** have higher numbers across all age groups, especially in the **10–15 years** and **5–9 years** categories.
- **In-House Placements** have more infants (under 1) than Agency Placements (12 vs. 5).
- The largest group in both placement types is **children aged 10–15 years**.

## Placement Distribution Overview

Date	In-House (Mainstream + Kinship)	IFA (Independent Fostering Agencies)
31 March 2024	56%	44%
<b>Target</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>30%</b>

As of the end of March 2025 we were **14 percentage points below** the in-house placement target

## Carer Availability Snapshot

Date	Carers on Hold	Notes
31 March 2024	10	Personal circumstances
31 March 2023	15	↓ Improvement from previous year

Additionally, some carers are **underutilised** due to:

- Approval for sibling groups only
- Specific child needs
- Changes in family circumstances
- "Staying Put" arrangements
- Offering only relief or short break care

## Implications:

- **Cost Pressure:** IFA placements are typically more expensive than in-house options, so the current distribution may be increasing financial strain.
- **Strategic Misalignment:** The current figures indicate a need to accelerate recruitment, retention, and utilisation of in-house carers to meet the 70% target.

## Actions for 25/26

1. **Targeted Recruitment:** Focus on carers who can take single placements or older children to balance the profile.
2. **Flexible Approvals:** Fit to Foster approval for ALL foster carers, meaning all foster carers will be approved 0-18 year, short-term, emergency and relief.
3. **Utilisation Review:** Conduct a placement-matching audit to identify underused capacity.
4. **Retention Support:** Offer tailored support to carers on hold to encourage reactivation for those carers on hold.

## Placement Stability

Children in Oxfordshire are experiencing **more frequent placement changes** and **less long-term continuity** than in previous years.

This trend may impact emotional wellbeing, educational progress, and overall outcomes.

## Short-Term Placement Stability

**Indicator:** % of children with **3 or more placements** during the year.

Area/Year	% with 3+ Placements
Oxfordshire 2023/24	13%
Oxfordshire 2024/25 (provisional)	<b>15% ▲</b>
Statistical Neighbours	11%
South East	12%

Area/Year	% with 3+ Placements
England	10%

- **Trend:** Oxfordshire's short-term stability has **worsened**, rising from 13% to 15%.
- **Context:** The 2024/25 figure is **5 percentage points higher** than the national average.

### Long-Term Placement Stability

**Indicator:** % of children in care for  $\geq 2.5$  years who have been in the same placement for  $\geq 2$  years.

Area/Year	% Stable Placements
Oxfordshire 2023/24	68%
Oxfordshire 2024/25 (provisional)	<b>49% ▼</b>
Statistical Neighbours	67%
South East	66%
England	68%

- **Trend:** A **significant decline** in long-term stability—**down 19 percentage points** from the previous year.
- **Context:** Oxfordshire now falls **well below** all comparator groups.
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## Summary

- **Short-term stability** is deteriorating, with more children experiencing multiple placements.
- **Long-term stability** has seen a sharp drop, suggesting challenges in sustaining placements over time.
- Oxfordshire at the end of March 2024 was **underperforming** compared to statistical neighbours, the Southeast, and national averages in both indicators.
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### What This Means for Children in Oxfordshire

- **Increased instability** can negatively impact children's emotional wellbeing, educational outcomes, and sense of security.
- The drop in long-term stability may reflect:
  - A mismatch between children's needs and available carers.
  - Pressures on placement sufficiency and carer retention.
  - Disruptions due to carers being on hold or underutilised.

## Strategic Actions to Improve Placement Stability

### 1. Enhance Placement Matching and Planning

- Introduce a centralised matching process for complex placements with key stakeholders.
- Embed child voice and carer feedback into matching decisions.

### 2. Strengthen Carer Retention and Support

- Build on the recruitment, retention and reflection meetings.
- Introduction of Fostering Community Hubs
- Expand trauma-informed training and therapeutic support for carers.
- Introduce a recognition scheme for carers maintaining long-term placements.

### 3. Maximise Carer Capacity and Flexibility

- The introduction of 'Fit to Foster' will increase capacity and flexibility.
- Audit and re-engage carers currently on hold or underutilised.

### 4. Improve Monitoring and Early Intervention

- The introduction of Power BI will support fostering to see the real-time placement stability for children we care for; providing for operational oversight.
- Require disruption meetings for all placement moves and track themes.
- Use data to inform targeted support and training for carers and staff.
-

## **5. Invest in Edge-of-Care and Step-Down Services**

- Work closely with Family Bridges and develop a model that utilises foster carers to prevent young people becoming care experienced.
- Develop step-down fostering models from residential care to family-based placements.
- Strengthen partnerships with health and education to support placement resilience.

## **6. Embed Co-Production and Lived Experience**

- Link in with the PSW and young person forums to co-design support and placement strategies.
- Use quarterly feedback loops to adapt services based on real-time experience

### **New Teams Overview**

#### **Kinship Matters Team**

The Kinship Matters Team, established on 1 April 2025, brings together all Supervising Social Workers (SSWs) responsible for kinship assessments into a single, cohesive county-wide service. This strategic realignment strengthens our focus on the evolving legislative landscape and reinforces Oxfordshire's commitment to recognising and supporting the vital role of kinship care in achieving permanence for children.

The team undertakes a broad range of statutory and court-directed assessments, including:

- Regulation 24 assessments,
- Special Guardianship Order (SGO) assessments (including private law applications),
- Additional family member assessments as directed by the court.

SSWs also work in close partnership with children's social workers to complete Initial Viability Assessments (IVAs), ensuring early identification and robust consideration of family networks.

A key strategic priority is the development of a comprehensive support offer for Special Guardians. We have already implemented a no-detriment policy, ensuring that foster carers transitioning to Special Guardianship receive the matched national minimum allowance. This policy reflects our commitment to equity and stability for children remaining within their extended families.

Looking ahead, we are actively exploring opportunities to engage with the national kinship allowance pilot and working groups. Our ambition is to localise and enhance support for kinship carers, ensuring they are equipped and valued as core partners in our permanence strategy.



To embed a culture of kinship-first thinking, we continue to deliver regular training across the workforce, raising awareness of the importance of identifying and supporting kinship carers for Children We Care For.

In 2025–26, we will undertake a scoping exercise to identify existing carers who may be considering permanency via an SGO. A two-year funding agreement has enabled us to dedicate an SSW to proactively support these cases, with the aim of progressing them to legal permanence where appropriate.

Finally, we have made a strategic decision to cease the use of Independent Social Workers (ISWs) for private SGO assessments. This ensures greater oversight, consistency, and quality assurance across all kinship work undertaken by the local authority.

### Performance and Activity Data (2024/25)

Assessment Type	2023/24	2024/25	Change
<b>Total Kinship Carers Assessed</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>↑ +19</b>
<b>Temporarily Approved Kinship Carers (Reg 24)</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>↓ -8</b>
<b>% Completed Within 24-Week Timescale</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>↓ -3%</b>

- The increase in total assessments reflects growing demand and the team's capacity to respond.
- The slight dip in timeliness is attributed to delays in DBS and medical checks, which are being actively escalated with partner agencies.
- The target remains 90% of assessments completed within timescales.

### Strategic Developments and Priorities

- **No-Detriment Policy:** Ensures foster carers transitioning to SGOs receive the matched national minimum allowance, promoting stability and equity.
- **Private SGO Assessments:** In 2024/25, 4 assessments were completed by Independent Social Workers (ISWs) due to capacity constraints. From 2025/26, all private SGO assessments will be completed by SSWs within the Kinship Matters team or area teams, enhancing consistency and oversight.
- **Workforce Development:** Regular training is delivered across the workforce to embed kinship-first thinking and improve early identification of family networks.

- **Permanency Pipeline:** A two-year funding agreement has enabled the allocation of a dedicated SSW to scope and support existing carers considering SGOs, with the aim of progressing these to legal permanence.
- **National Engagement:** Oxfordshire is exploring participation in the **national kinship allowance pilot** and related working groups to enhance local support offers.

## Placements Team

The **Placements Team** was launched in **June 2025** as a strategic response to operational pressures identified within the area teams. Comprising a **Team Manager (TM)** and **three Senior Social Workers (SSWs)**, the team was established to centralise the management of **foster placement referrals**, particularly those requiring **emergency responses**. The Fostering Service and a high focus of the Placements Team is to continue to work closely with the **Brokerage Team**, whose role is to identify placements with **Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs)** or **residential providers** but only after all in-house placement options have been explored.

## Purpose and Structure

Previously, placement referrals were managed by senior practitioners within area teams as part of their duty systems. This model had become increasingly unsustainable, impacting the teams' ability to meet their own statutory responsibilities. The introduction of the Placements Team has significantly alleviated this burden, allowing area teams to focus on their core duties while ensuring that placement referrals are handled swiftly and consistently.

To maintain a balance between duty coverage and statutory casework, the team operates a **rotational duty system**, with each SSW covering placement duty **once every three weeks**. This ensures continuity of service while safeguarding the capacity of each practitioner to manage their own caseloads effectively.

## Key Developments and Impact

Area	Summary
<b>Same-Day and Short-Term Placements</b>	The Fostering Service has increasingly taken the lead in identifying in-house carers for urgent or short-term placements, reducing reliance on external providers.

Area	Summary
<b>Relief Care Coordination</b>	The Fostering Service now manages the identification and coordination of <b>relief care periods</b> , offering direct support to in-house carers.
<b>Improved placement matching</b>	By enabling dedicated oversight and quicker identification of suitable carers.
<b>Reduced pressure on area teams</b>	Leading to improved morale and better focus on statutory casework.
<b>New Strategic Role</b>	A dedicated Placements Team that sits within Fostering has been introduced to act as a <b>liaison between Brokerage, Fostering, and Children's Teams</b> , improving communication and placement planning.
<b>Emergency Placement Outcomes</b>	This integrated approach has enabled better use of <b>emergency and relief carers</b> , resulting in a <b>reduction in emergency IFA and residential placements</b> .

### Strategic Ambition

The team's overarching goal is to **prioritise in-house placements** wherever possible. The new Placements Team has strengthened this ambition by ensuring that all internal options are fully explored before external placements are considered.

The team has also begun to **collate and analyse referral data**, which will provide valuable insights into:

- The volume and nature of placement requests
- Patterns in emergency versus planned placements
- The fostering service's capacity to meet demand
- Gaps in provision that may inform future recruitment or training priorities

This data-driven approach will support evidence-based planning and continuous improvement across the service.

### Private Fostering

**Private Fostering is overseen within the Fostering Service and currently staffed by 1 FTE Senior Practitioner, with a 0.5 FTE.** A separate annual report is produced for Private Fostering and should be read in conjunction with this report to provide a full overview of service activity and performance.

The Private Fostering team holds responsibility for ensuring that the welfare of children placed with Private Foster Carers is safeguarded and promoted. This statutory duty is fulfilled by the Private Fostering team and by the child's allocated social worker (where one is in place).

### Supported Lodgings

**The Supported Lodgings scheme provides accommodation within a family setting for young people aged 16 to 21, offering 10 hours of support per week from carers to help prepare them for independent living.**

Following the introduction of new supported housing regulations in October 2023, all existing Supported Lodgings carers have undergone Form F assessments and have been presented to the Fostering Panel to ensure compliance with fostering regulations. These carers are now required to complete mandatory training, have access to the full foster carer training programme, and receive supervision every six weeks. In addition, they are subject to one unannounced visit per year and an annual review, in line with foster carer standards.

As of 31 March 2025, five young people were placed with Supported Lodgings carers. During 2024/25, five new carers were approved, bringing the total to seven. Of these, three are dually approved to provide both Supported Lodgings and relief care. The service continues to promote dual approval of carers for Supported Lodgings and mainstream fostering to maximise placement flexibility and placement sufficiency.

## Fostering Panel Overview

The Fostering Panel is supported by two employed Panel Advisors and comprises a total of 16 panel members, including an independent Chair and Vice Chair. Of the 16 members, 10 are independent and 6 are qualified social workers. The panel convenes at least three times per month to ensure timely decision-making and oversight.

A separate **Fostering Panel Annual Report** is produced and should be read alongside this report for a comprehensive view of panel activity and quality assurance. (see appendix 2)

## Panel Activity Summary (2024/25)

- **Mainstream Approvals:** 28 cases were presented for mainstream foster carer approval, 17 of these were new approvals, 11 where following household reviews.
- **Kinship Assessments:** 45 full kinship assessments were heard (up from 41 the previous year).
- **Regulation 24 (Temporary Approvals):** 70 cases were presented (compared to 64 last year).
- **Regulation 25 (Extensions to Temporary Approvals):** 38 requests were made to extend temporary approval up to 24 weeks, primarily due to delays in receiving medical advice.
- **Brief Reports:** 9 brief reports were presented to panel recommending cessation of assessments; 5 of these were approved by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).
- **Household Reviews:** 41 reviews were presented, including:
  - 32 first-year reviews
  - 2 standards of care reviews
  - Remaining cases related to changes in approval terms.
- **Long-Term Matches:** 17 children were formally matched with their long-term foster carers at panel (compared to 20 in the previous year).
- **Unlawful Placements:** 10 instances occurred where children were placed without panel approval during the year.
- **Independent Review Mechanism (IRM):** 3 applications were submitted to the IRM; however, no recommendations were made to alter the original decisions.

## Insights and Considerations

- **Increased Kinship and Reg 24 activity** indicates growing pressure on kinship services and the need for timely assessments.
- **Delays in medical advice** are a recurring theme, impacting the ability to meet statutory timescales—this may require escalation or partnership work with health colleagues.
- **Unlawful placements (10)** highlight a risk area that should be monitored closely to ensure regulatory compliance.

- The **IRM outcomes** reinforce confidence in the panel's decision-making integrity.

## Oxfordshire Therapeutic Foster Care (OTFC)

A specialist, trauma-informed programme supporting children and foster carers.

### Programme Overview

- OTFC is a **locally implemented, multidisciplinary model** that brings together a dedicated team to support both the child and their foster carer.
- The approach includes:
  - **Direct therapeutic intervention** with the child
  - **Group supervision and specialist training** for carers
  - **Close coordination with education providers**
- The model is grounded in attachment theory, child development, neuroscience, social learning and systemic theory enabling a bespoke package of support tailored to each child's needs.

### 2024/25 Activity Summary

- **Total children supported: 16**
  - **10 aged 12+**
  - **6 aged 3–11**
  - Includes **3 wraparound placements** (children not placed with OTFC carers but supported by the team)

### Placement Trends & Outcomes

- **Adolescents (12+):**
  - 7 placed with OTFC carers, 3 in existing placements
  - Exceeds the projected target of 6 by 2026/27
  - Outcomes:
    - 3 remained with foster carers
    - 1 returned to birth family
    - 2 transitioned to residential care
- **Younger children (3–11):**
  - Placements remained stable
  - 1 child preparing for adoption
  - 1 child likely to remain long-term with current carers
- **Complex Needs:**
  - 1 child with disabilities transitioned to residential care after a year with OTFC, which provided critical evidence of need for specialist provision

### Strategic Developments

- **Wraparound Support:** Provided to 3 additional placements to prevent breakdown—this area will be expanded in 2025.

- **Recruitment:** Active campaign underway to recruit new OTFC carers, both externally and from within the existing carer pool.
- **Marketing:** OTFC to be featured in Oxfordshire's broader fostering promotion strategy

### Mockingbird: 2024/2025 Summary

**Purpose:** A peer-support model designed to strengthen relationships and stability within fostering by creating extended family-style networks called "hubs."

**Structure:** Each hub is led by a **Hub Home Carer** and supports a group of foster, kinship, adoption, and birth families.

**2024/25 Reach:** Supported **33 families** and **50 children** across **4 hubs**.

**Activities:** Delivered a mix of **social events** and **1:1 support**, with increased engagement over the year.

### Challenges

- **Stagnation in participation** was observed among long-standing hub members (some since 2018)
- **High cost per family** raised concerns about value for money
- **Fidelity constraints** of the Fostering Network model limited the ability to expand hubs without compromising programme integrity

### Strategic Review and Transition

- **Challenges:** Participation plateaued among long-standing members (some since 2018), and the **cost per family** was high.
- **Fidelity Constraints:** Expanding hubs would have compromised the model's integrity as defined by the Fostering Network.
- **Decision:** In early 2025, Oxfordshire decided to **cease the Mockingbird programme**.
- **Next Steps:** Resources are being redirected to develop a **bespoke, inclusive Fostering Community Hub model** that will reach a broader range of foster families, co-designed with carers and staff.

### Carer Coordinator Model

#### Role and Function

- Oxfordshire employs **four Carer Coordinators** who:
  - Speak with prospective carers to offer reassurance and real-life insight.
  - Participate in **Skills to Foster** training.
  - Provide feedback to support the quality of assessments.

#### Impact

- Feedback from prospective carers is **consistently excellent**, highlighting the value of hearing directly from experienced carers.
- The model enhances **engagement, trust, and confidence** in the fostering process.

## Regional Recognition

- The **LAFSE pilot** has recognised the strength of this model.
- One Oxfordshire Carer Coordinator has been appointed as a **Carer Ambassador** for the region.
- The model is now being **adopted across the South East** showcasing Oxfordshire as a leader in carer-led recruitment and support.

## Strategic Action: Launching Fostering Communities Hub

### Purpose

The Fostering Service has transitioned away from the Mockingbird model, which was a siloed model and financially unsustainable for the local authority. In its place, we are reinvesting in a more inclusive and cost-effective approach that supports the entire fostering community. As part of this shift, we have integrated the previously duplicated Care Coordinator role into a more cohesive and visible support structure, ensuring foster carers receive consistent and accessible support across the service.

### Implementation Steps

- 1. Define Roles Within Hubs**
  - Clarify responsibilities for peer support, recruitment engagement, and retention activities.
  - Include coordinators in hub planning and decision-making.
- 2. Create Localised Support Networks**
  - Assign coordinators to geographic or thematic clusters (e.g. sibling placements, emergency care).
  - Facilitate regular drop-in sessions and peer forums.
- 3. Enhance Visibility**
  - Promote coordinators through hub communications, events, and digital platforms.
  - Include coordinator profiles and contact points on the fostering website.
- 4. Measure Impact**
  - Track conversion rates and retention linked to coordinator interactions.
  - Collect feedback from carers and applicants on hub engagement.
- 5. Sustain and Expand**
  - Secure funding to maintain and grow the Fostering Community Hubs.
  - Explore opportunities for Fostering Community Hub Leads to support post-approval development and stability



## Fostering Toolkit Programme

### Summary

The Fostering Toolkit remains the cornerstone of our training offer for all foster carers, including kinship carers and Special Guardians. Developed collaboratively by Oxfordshire County Council and Suffolk County Council in 2019, the programme promotes a strengths-based, flexible learning environment that builds confidence, encourages peer support, and addresses everyday fostering challenges.

Since its launch in October 2019, 192 carers have completed the full programme, including the Tots Toolkit. Between April 2024 and March 2025, we delivered:

- 5 full Toolkit programmes (3 in-person, 2 virtual, including an evening course)
- 1 virtual Tots Toolkit (6 participants)
- A standalone Emotional Regulation module

The programme is coordinated by a part-time Toolkit Coordinator (18 hours/week), supported by the Team Manager and Family Support Workers. Each group is co-facilitated by two staff members. The main Toolkit includes 12 sessions, while the Tots Toolkit (for carers of children under 3) includes 10. Additional modules cover Emotional Regulation, Sensory Integration, ADD/ASD, and Risk-Taking.

### Challenges

- Ensuring consistent attendance and engagement across modules
- Reaching foster carers who have not yet accessed the Toolkit
- Balancing delivery formats (virtual vs. in-person) to meet diverse needs
- Maintaining capacity with limited coordination hours

### Strategy and Future Plans

- Proactively target carers who have not yet attended the Toolkit
- Review attendance data and refine marketing approaches
- Launch a new module focused on limit setting and boundaries
- Pilot a 12-session Teenage Toolkit programme
- Expand the model to families through a new “Toolkit for Families” pilot in 2025, developed in partnership with Early Help colleagues

### Commercial Development

As part of our ongoing fostering development plan and in collaboration with Suffolk County Council we will be exploring opportunities to offer the Fostering Toolkit as a marketable resource to other local authorities. This initiative aims to share best practice while generating income to support further innovation and sustainability within our service.

### OTFC Staff Training Offer

To support continuous professional development across the fostering service, a monthly **Bitesize Training** session is offered to all staff.

These sessions provide a reflective and collaborative space to:

- Share resources and best practice
- Deepen understanding of trauma and its impact
- Strengthen our ability to support foster and kinship carers through empathetic, therapeutic approaches

Topics delivered over the past year have included:

- **Sensory Integration**
- **Therapeutic Parenting** with a focus on safety
- **Developmental Trauma**

This training offer reinforces our commitment to trauma-informed practice and equips staff with the tools to better support carers and children alike.

### **Specialist Family Support Worker**

The Specialist Family Support Worker (FSW) role is a full-time post within the fostering service, currently delivered by two part-time staff members working 15 and 22.5 hours per week respectively.

### **Support Provided**

Between April 2024 and March 2025, the FSWs supported **28 fostering placements**, including:

- **7 foster carers**
- **19 kinship carers**

The role provides **flexible, tailored support** to carers, particularly:

- New carers developing their skills
- Placements under pressure or at risk of breakdown

Support includes emotional guidance, problem-solving, behaviour management strategies, and an offer of a reflective space, drawing on the fostering toolkit and PACE approaches.

### **Additional Contributions**

- Co-facilitation of a **weekly virtual support group** for a small cohort of carers
- Active involvement in delivering the **Fostering Toolkit Programme**

### **Referral and Review Process**

- Referrals are straightforward, enabling timely support setup
- The nature and duration of involvement are reviewed regularly through supervision and the **CWCF review process**

- Referrals can be general, but it is essential to **clearly define the FSW's role** in collaboration with the referrer and carer to avoid overlap with other services
- **Regular review meetings** with referrers have been introduced to improve information sharing and role clarity

### Big Brother Big Sisters (BBBS) Mentoring Programme

The **Big Brother Big Sisters (BBBS)** programme is a community-based mentoring initiative delivered by the **Oxford Hub** in partnership with **Oxfordshire County Council's Children's Services**. The OTFC Manager acts as the departmental link, working closely with the Oxford Hub Coordinator to support the recruitment, training, and supervision of volunteers.

### Programme Reach and Impact (April 2024 – March 2025)

- **Total active volunteers (as of March 2025):** 56
- **Mentoring pairs:** 47 within Oxfordshire, 9 out-of-county
- Volunteers maintain **weekly or fortnightly contact** with their matched child, engaging in positive, community-based activities.

### Activity Overview

A total of **567 outings** took place this year, broadly categorised as:

- **Just for fun:** 296
- **Active and healthy lifestyle:** 180
- **Arts and culture:** 73
- **Academic support:** 18

This programme continues to provide meaningful, consistent relationships for children and young people, helping to build confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging.

### Recruitment and retention of Foster Carers

Fostering recruitment remains a national crisis, presenting significant challenges in both attracting new foster carers and retaining current ones. Fewer people are stepping forward to foster, while more are deciding to leave.

In March 2024, the following government research was published, to capture the challenging landscape: Recruitment and retention in mainstream fostering - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)) In 2018, the number of national approvals was 4,985 compared to just 3,680 in 2023.

### Enquiry Activity Summary (2024/25)

Below details the enquiry activity for the last financial year.

Metric	Total
Contacts Received	135
Enquiries Completed	86
Initial Home Visits (IHVs)	38
Applications Given	33
Applications Received	25
Prep Training Completed	18
Panels Attended	17
Enquiries Closed	48

### Key Insights

- **Conversion Rate:** 63.7% of contacts progressed to completed enquiries (86 out of 135).
- **Engagement:** 38 IHVs indicate strong follow-up on viable enquiries.
- **Progression:** 25 applicants submitted applications, and 17 reached panel stage.
- **Closures:** 48 enquiries were closed, mostly due to safeguarding concerns, applicant withdrawal, timing, health, or non-response.

## Recruitment Progress:

- **2023/24:** 5 foster carers approved.
- **2024/25:** 17 foster carers approved this is a **significant improvement**, attributed to the team's focused marketing and recruitment efforts.
- Many new carers begin as **relief carers**, which, while not immediately increasing long-term capacity, plays a vital role in emergency and short-term placements.

## Retention and Conversion:

- **3 carers** transitioned from relief to short/long-term approvals in 2024/25.
- Retention is recognised as the **most critical strategy**, supported by:
  - Listening and responding to carers' feedback.
  - Promoting through word of mouth.
  - Strengthening support services.

## National Context:

- National approvals dropped from **4,985 in 2018** to **3,680 in 2023**, highlighting the scale of the recruitment challenge.
- Government and sector research (e.g., from the **Fostering Network**, May 2023) underscores the importance of **retention-focused strategies**.

## Implications

### Rising Demand, Limited Supply:

- In **2024/25**, **1,113 children** were in care in Oxfordshire this is a number that continues to rise annually.
- Demand for foster placements **consistently exceeds** the availability of carers, reflecting a **national crisis** in fostering recruitment

Oxfordshire's increase in approvals is encouraging, but **sustained effort** is needed to:

- Expand capacity for short- and long-term placements.
- Support and retain existing carers.
- Embrace flexible entry points like relief care to build long-term commitment.

## Fostering Approvals Timeliness

- In **2023/24**, the average Form F assessment took **8 months**, aligning with national guidelines.
- In **2024/25**, **65%** of assessments were completed within **6 months**, showing strong performance.

- **35%** experienced delays due to:
  - Applicant circumstances
  - DBS/medical delays
  - Staff absences
  - Applicant pacing preferences
- Oxfordshire is actively piloting the **CORAM BAAF condensed Form F**, with **excellent panel feedback** on report quality and presentation.

## Strategic Actions to Improve Timeliness

### 1. Embed the Condensed Form F Model

- Fully adopt the CORAM BAAF condensed Form F for mainstream assessments.
- Provide training and templates to streamline usage across the team.

### 2. Strengthen Process Monitoring

- Utilise the Power BI dashboard to track all assessments with key milestones and alerts.
- Flag assessments at risk of delay and assign support or escalation.

### 3. Improve Inter-agency Coordination

- Work with health and DBS services to expedite medical and background checks.
- Establish escalation protocols for delayed external inputs.

### 4. Flexible Assessment Pathways

- Offer tailored timelines for applicants with personal constraints (e.g. phased assessments).
- Maintain engagement with applicants preferring slower pace to avoid drop-off.

### 5. Staffing and Resilience Planning

- Build contingency capacity to cover staff absences (e.g. floating assessors or relief support from within the fostering service).
- Monitor workload distribution to avoid bottlenecks.

### 6. Panel Feedback Integration

- Continue gathering fostering panel feedback on assessment quality and timeliness.
- Use feedback to refine training and support for assessing social workers.

## Regionalisation

### Strategic Summary: LAFSE Pilot Participation

- **Pilot Launch:** July 8, 2024, with the goal of increasing foster carer recruitment across the South East.
- **Funding:** Oxfordshire received **£39,000** (half of the £80,000 initially agreed), used to appoint a **part-time Assistant Team Manager** and an **Enquiry Officer** on temporary contracts.
- **Impact:** Despite efforts, there has been **no significant increase** in enquiries or recruitment across the region.
- **Extension:** The **DfE has extended the pilot to March 2026** for further data collection and impact assessment.
- **Local Insight:** Most enquiries in Oxfordshire are still driven by **local campaigns**, not the regional LAFSE platform.
- **Operational Challenge:** Redirecting the website and phone number to LAFSE has created confusion about referral sources.
- **Positive Note:** Oxfordshire's active participation in **sub-cluster meetings** has supported shared learning and good practice exchange.

### Strategic Recommendations

#### 1. Clarify Local Identity Within the Regional Model

- Reinststate or dual-brand Oxfordshire's local website and contact number to maintain visibility and track local engagement.
- Ensure all marketing materials clearly identify Oxfordshire's fostering service.

#### 2. Strengthen Data Collection and Attribution

- Standardise enquiry tracking questions to accurately capture source of contact.
- Use this data to assess the true impact of LAFSE vs. local campaigns.

#### 3. Maximise Return on Investment

- Focus remaining pilot participation on **learning and collaboration**, not just recruitment numbers.
- Share Oxfordshire's successful local campaign strategies with the LAFSE network.

#### 4. Plan for Post-Pilot Sustainability

- Prepare for the end of temporary contracts by identifying how key functions (e.g. enquiry handling) will be absorbed or transitioned.
- Evaluate whether continued participation in LAFSE beyond March 2026 aligns with Oxfordshire's strategic goals.

## 5. Advocate for Local Flexibility

- Engage with DfE and LAFSE leadership to advocate for models that allow local authorities to retain autonomy in branding and engagement while contributing to regional collaboration.

### Skills to Foster Training

#### Purpose

To prepare prospective **mainstream and kinship carers** with the knowledge, confidence, and insight needed to begin their fostering journey.

#### Delivery Model

- Offered as a **2-day course**.
- Delivered on **alternate months** and **on demand** to ensure flexibility and responsiveness to applicant needs.

#### Continuous Improvement

- The **Recruitment Team** regularly **reviews and updates** the training content.
- Feedback from participants and Carer Coordinators is used to refine delivery and ensure relevance.

### Fostering Community Hub Leads Involvement

- Approved carers speak during sessions to share lived experience.
- Their involvement consistently receives **excellent feedback** from prospective carers, enhancing engagement and realism.

### Foster carer engagement and retention

#### Recruitment and Retention Meetings

##### Purpose

- Provide a **focused space** to update foster carers on service developments.
- Address **specific concerns** raised by carers in a collaborative setting.
- Strengthen **two-way communication** between carers and the fostering service.

##### Format & Frequency

- Held **bi-monthly** in person.
- Followed by a **virtual session** to ensure inclusivity for those unable to attend.
- Virtual sessions were introduced in direct response to **carer feedback**.



## Reflective Sessions

### Purpose

- Bring together **foster carers, children's social workers, and supervising social workers**.
- Promote **professional collaboration**, shared learning, and open dialogue.
- Encourage **positive reflection** and strengthen working relationships.

### Frequency

- Held approximately **every three months**.

### Impact

- Fostered a **dynamic and respectful space** for joint working.
- Reinforced the **professionalism of foster carers** and the value of their insight.

## One-Off & Celebration Events

- **Special sessions** have focused on:
  - Celebrating fostering successes.
  - Deep-diving into the **foster carer-supervising social worker relationship**.
- A **festive thank-you event** in December 2024 brought carers and staff together in a relaxed, appreciative setting.

## Forward Strategy

- Continue to **listen and adapt** to foster carer needs.
- Expand and evolve retention events to ensure they remain **effective, inclusive, and meaningful**.
- Use feedback from these sessions to inform **service improvements** and **policy development**.

## Relief Support for Foster Carers

### Eligibility & Access

- All foster carers can request **relief care** if it is agreed as part of the child's care plan.
- Relief care allows carers to take **planned time out** while ensuring continuity of care for the child.

## Tier-Based Entitlement

Tier Level	Relief Nights per Month	Notes
Tier 1	Up to 2 nights	No impact on weekly allowance
Tier 3+	Up to 3 nights	Additional relief can be arranged to support placement stability

- Relief care is **flexible** and can be increased where needed to maintain placement stability.

## Out-of-Hours Support

All foster carers have access to:

- The **Duty Desk** during working hours
- The **Emergency Duty Team (EDT)** for out-of-hours support

## On-Call Access for all Foster Carers

**Current story:** Oxfordshire County Council do not provide an on-call service for carers. Historically, carers did have access to the Residential On-Call Service, however, this was not utilised by carers due to the Residential staff not having an insight or knowledge around fostering. Fostering was subsequently moved from this service provision. The Supervising Social Workers provide a 'soft touch' support to carers outside of office hours, especially in emergency placement situations. However, this is not a sustainable long-term option.

**Proposal:** The foster service to have a dedicated On-Call service for all foster carers.

### Benefits:

- Enhances **placement stability** by providing timely support.
- Reduces reliance on EDT for non-emergency queries.

- Improves **carer confidence and retention**, especially for newer or solo carers.
- Aligns with the service's commitment to **valuing and supporting carers**

## Options to Explore

### 1. Fostering-Specific On-Call Line

- Staffed by experienced fostering professionals (e.g. senior SSWs on rotation)
- Available during key out-of-hours periods (e.g. 5–11 PM weekdays, weekends)

### 2. Regional Collaboration

- Explore shared on-call models with neighbouring authorities or through LAFSE
- Pool resources to ensure sustainability and coverage

### 3. Tiered Support Model

- Offer enhanced on-call access to carers supporting complex placements or new carers

## Foster Carer Support Groups – Current & Future Model

### Current Support Group Structure

- **Monthly support groups** are held across three geographic areas:
  - **City**
  - **North Oxfordshire**
  - **South Oxfordshire**
- Facilitated by **Carer Coordinators**, sometimes alongside **Supervising Social Workers**.
- A **weekly support group** is also provided by **OTFC** for carers where placements are at risk and additional support is needed.
- A **dedicated support group for carers under assessment** has been introduced to support preparation and induction.

### Transition to Fostering Community Hubs

When the **Fostering Community Hubs** launch, support groups will become part of a broader, more structured support offer led by **Hub Leads**. This will include:

Component	Description
<b>Monthly Support Groups</b>	Continued delivery across the county, coordinated by Hub Leads

Component	Description
<b>1:1 Support</b>	Direct peer or professional support for carers through the hub
<b>Buddying</b>	Pairing new or prospective carers with experienced carers for informal guidance
<b>6 Annual Events</b>	Community-building events for carers and families

### Strategic Benefits

- Creates a **consistent and localised support structure** for all carers.
- Enhances **peer-to-peer learning and retention** through buddying and group reflection.
- Strengthens the **professional identity and community** of foster carers.
- Aligns with the service's broader goals of **retention, stability, and carer wellbeing**.

## Oxfordshire Foster Care Association (OFCa) – Strategic Summary

### Overview

- OFCA is a **charity run by Oxfordshire foster carers**, providing valued support to carers and children.
- It receives **partial funding from Oxfordshire County Council (OCC)** and raises its own funds.
- OFCA plays a key role in:
  - Offering **free and discounted access to events** (e.g. football matches, pantomimes)
  - Providing **Christmas gifts** for children in emergency placements
  - Supporting **recruitment** by attending community events
  - Hosting the **annual foster carer forum** and **children's Christmas party**

### Current Funding

- OCC has provided:

- **£12,000 annually** for the past two years
- Previously, a **£7,000 annual grant**
- However, **OFCA has not submitted financial reporting** on how the grant has been spent.
- OFCA is now requesting **additional financial contributions** from OCC for events

## Proposal: Strengthen Partnership with Accountability

### 1. Introduce a Grant Agreement with KPIs

To ensure transparency and value for money, future funding should be tied to a formal agreement that includes:

KPI Area	Example Metrics
Engagement	Number of carers and children supported through events
Recruitment Support	Number of events attended in partnership with OCC
Wellbeing Impact	Feedback from carers on OFCA-led activities
Financial Transparency	Submission of annual financial report and event breakdowns

### 2. Tiered Funding Model

- Maintain the **£12,000 grant** for 2025/26 **conditional on KPI delivery**.
- Consider a **tiered model** in future years:
  - Base grant (e.g. £7,000)
  - Additional funding tied to specific deliverables (e.g. events, recruitment support)

### 3. Joint Planning and Visibility

- Align OFCA's calendar of events with OCC's fostering strategy and community hub activities.

- Promote OFCA's contributions more visibly through OCC channels to increase awareness and recognition.

#### 4. Annual Review

- Conduct an annual joint review of OFCA's impact and funding use.
- Use this to inform future funding decisions and partnership development.

### Marketing Performance Overview (2024/25)

#### Campaign Reach

- **Local campaigns** delivered in 7 key areas: Bicester, Abingdon & Witney, Banbury, Oxford & Kidlington, Thame & Wallingford, Didcot, and Chipping Norton.
- Activities included:
  - Leaflet drops to homes, businesses, and community centres
  - Posters and physical events
  - **8 online events**
  - Digital advertising (e.g. Google AdWords, social media)
  - Radio, bus backs, community magazines, libraries, schools, and conferences

#### Spend

- **£74K** was spent on marketing, including radio advertising and coverage for localised campaigns, digital advertising, leaflet and posters for locality campaigns, posters, banners, gazebo, booking on to events, social media, advertising in local magazines.

#### Outcomes

- **Correlated increase in enquiries** in areas with targeted campaigns.
- **3 additional enquiries** directly attributed to automated email nudges.
- Website improvements led to better user journeys and engagement.

### Importance of Word of Mouth

#### Carer Voice as a Strategic Asset

- Foster carers are central to the campaign's tone and messaging.
- Real stories and peer-to-peer messaging are used across all channels.
- Carer Coordinators and Carer Ambassadors play a key role in:
  - Speaking at events and training
  - Engaging with prospective carers
  - Sharing lived experience

## Strategic Direction

- Word of mouth is recognised as the **most powerful recruitment tool**.
- Future campaigns will:
  - Focus on **localised, carer-led content**
  - Promote **staff and carer takeovers** on social media
  - Build **community trust** through authentic storytelling

## Recommendations Moving Forward

### 1. Consolidate All Fostering Communications

- Align Foster Care Fortnight, local events, and regional campaigns under one strategy.

### 2. Clarify Role of Fostering South East (FSE)

- Seek clear commitments from FSE on their 2025/26 activity in Oxfordshire to avoid brand confusion.

### 3. Phase 2 Strategy

- Specific Fostering Marketing Officer to sit within COMMS
- Build on local awareness with deeper engagement.
- Continue using carer voices to personalise the message.
- Optimise all touchpoints in the enquiry journey for consistency and clarity.

### 4. Website and Content Review

- The website is not fit for purpose, an audit and update of content to align with the campaign tone and user needs is required.
- The website update will be the responsibility of the Marketing Officer and content will be agreed by the Fostering Service.



## Community Engagement & Promotional Strategy

### Physical Presence Across the County

The Recruitment Team actively participates in a wide range of events to ensure visibility and inclusivity:

- **Community & Cultural Events:** Pride, Eid, SEN events, Virtual School conferences
- **Local Outreach:** Cafés, council buildings, libraries, schools
- **Partnerships:** Collaborative promotion with OFCA to amplify reach

### Promotional Materials

A strong visual identity is supported by:

- Gazebo, banners, t-shirts, pens, bears, car stickers
- Proposed additions: lanyards and broader SLT (Senior Leadership Team) involvement at events

These materials help create a welcoming and professional presence, reinforcing brand recognition and trust.

### Importance of Staff & Carer Visibility

- Plans are in place to **capture wider staff support** and promote the work of the fostering service and foster carers.
- The presence of **approved carers** at events and training continues to be one of the most **effective engagement tools**, offering authenticity and reassurance to prospective carers.

### Strategic Recommendations

1. **Expand SLT Participation:** Increase leadership visibility at public events to reinforce organisational commitment.
2. **Diversify Event Portfolio:** Continue attending culturally diverse and inclusive events to reach underrepresented communities.
3. **Track Engagement Impact:** Monitor enquiry spikes following events to assess ROI and refine targeting.
4. **Enhance Promotional Toolkit:** Introduce new branded items (e.g. lanyards, digital QR cards) and refresh existing materials regularly.
5. **Integrate Messaging:** Ensure all promotional efforts align with the broader fostering campaign tone and objectives.

### Allegations Against Foster Carers

- **Allegations:**15  
(Down from 29 in 2023/24)



- **From Foster Children:** 6
- **From Other Sources:** 9

#### **Outcomes:**

- 7 – Resolved with no further action
- 5 – Continued monitoring for an agreed period
- 3 – Referred to the fostering panel for review of approval

#### **Complaints About the Fostering Service**

- **Complaints:**3  
(Down from 8 in 2023/24)
  - 2 were **partly or fully upheld**

#### **Support for Foster Carers**

Complaints and allegations can be distressing and may lead some carers to consider leaving fostering. To support them:

- Carers can access help from the Fostering Community Hub Leads.
- An **independent support service** is available through the **Foster Talk**

#### **In-House Support for Foster Carers and Staff**

##### **Therapeutic and Clinical Support**

- **Attach Service:** Clinical psychologists offer therapeutic consultations and direct support, which is highly valued by carers and contributes to placement stability.
- **Attach Consultations:** Ongoing access to therapeutic input for carers and staff.

##### **Specialist and Peer Support**

- **Fostering Community Hubs:** Provide peer-led support and community-based connections.
- **Therapeutic Foster Care Team (OTFC):** Offers additional therapeutic sessions and tailored support.

##### **Educational Support**

- **Virtual School:** Supports the educational progress and wellbeing of children in care.

##### **Resources and Benefits**

- **Regular Newsletters:** Keep carers informed and connected.

- **Foster Carer Handbook:** A comprehensive guide to policies, procedures, and support.
- **Fostering Talk Membership:** Includes access to advice, mediation, and independent support.
- **Max Card:** Offers a range of discounts for foster families.

## 24 to 25 Fostering Development plan update:

### Recruitment & Retention

- **Recruitment Strategy Review:** Aiming to recruit at least **20 new foster carers annually** to reach a **70% in-house placement rate by 2026/27**.
- **Triple R Model for Retention:**
  - **Retention:** Deep dives with foster carers to identify and resolve issues.
  - **Reflection:** Themed reflective practice sessions to build relationships.
  - **Revelation:** Celebrating carers and sharing success stories.

**Outcome:** we recruited 17 new foster carers last year; however, we had 34 deregistration's, of which 2 adopted the children they were caring for and 1 was granted an SGO. The other reasons were due to a variety of reasons with the highest reason due to the carer retiring.

### Team Structure & Support

- **Fostering Service Restructure:**
  - Proposed creation of a **dedicated Kinship/SGO team** with Family Support Workers (FSWs) to support carers and align with the 'no detriment' policy.
- **Placement & Retention Team:**
  - Plan to establish a **dedicated team** to relieve pressure on area teams and improve placement coordination.
- **On-Call System:**
  - Ambition to implement an **out-of-hours support line** for foster carers to enhance retention.

### Outcome:

- The dedicated Kinship/SGO team and placements team went live in June 2025.
- The fostering service do not yet have an On-Call system for carers.

### Placement Stability & Innovation

- **Home from Home Project:**
  - Matching emergency/respice carers to children for stability.
  - Goal: Employ **3 salaried carers** for emergency bridging placements.
  - Collaboration with **Family Bridges** to support families under assessment or S17 intervention.

## Outcome:

- the home from home project to match and utilise emergency/respite carers is operating and successful.
- With regards to the 3 salaried carers, the DfE is starting an pilot project for a salaried carer as part of the regionalisation, however, this is still being discussed.
- The fostering service and family bridges are working together to look at data of need for such a service.

## Policy Development

- **‘No Detriment’ Policy:**
  - Supports kinship carers transitioning to SGO.
  - Policy and business case prepared for **Star Chamber**.
- **‘Home Loans’ Policy:**
  - In development to fund **home extensions** for foster carers, increasing placement sufficiency.

## Outcome:

- The SGO ‘no detriment’ policy was launched in August 2024, and this has seen a significant shift to kinship carers progressing to SGO, the number of children who exited care via SGO was 42.
- The home loans policy has been through governance and heard at Capital Programmes Board on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2025, this was agreed. The next steps are to design the process for the home loans applications.

## Systems & Processes

- **Exploring CHARMS:**
  - Evaluating CHARMS as a replacement for LCS to better meet fostering needs and data tracking.
- **Policy & Procedure Review:**
  - Reviewing standards of care and other policies to ensure **consistent** practice across the service.

## Outcome:

- Oxfordshire County Council are committed to modifying LCS and ensuring it is fit for purpose for carer use and the fostering needs – this is in process and part of the fostering service development plan (see appendix 3).
- We are continually reviewing our policies and procedures; this will remain ongoing.

## Fostering Development Plan 2025–26 (read in conjunction with appendix 4)

### Policy & Incentives

Initiative	Status	Next Steps
<b>Carer Home Loan Policy</b>	✓ Completed with proposed annual waiver	Capital Programme Board (July) – next steps to design the application process etc.
<b>Fostering Friendly HR Policy</b>	✓ Completed with improved leave	Final sign-off by OCC SLT & Unison → Launch via internal comms and link with external partnerships.
<b>Foster Carer Payment Review</b>	✓ Analysis completed (no business case for mileage)	Hold KPI workshop for new child-based payment model → Assess feasibility of relief care roll-over pilot

### Placement Matching & Support

Initiative	Status	Next Steps
<b>Fostering Panel Improvements</b>	✓ Implemented (all carers approved as 'Fit to foster for 0-18 and for ST/LT/Relief, all ages)	Apply to new carers immediately and existing carers at next household reviews

Initiative	Status	Next Steps
<b>Fostering Communities Hub</b> (Mockingbird replacement)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Business case completed – submitted to CSMT and DLT – agreed.	Launch August 2025
<b>Short Breaks Project</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Planning	Hold scoping meeting to define project scope and challenges

## Kinship & Special Guardianship

Initiative	Status	Next Steps
<b>SGO Conversion Support</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1 SSW recruited using targeted funding	Set 2025/26 targets via SGO Monitoring Board
<b>Kinship Allowance Pilot</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Planning	Continue DfE bid planning using data insights
<b>Kinship Local Offer</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> In development	Produce and publish brochure

## Data & Digital Tools

Initiative	Status	Next Steps
<b>Fostering Dashboard</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Launched	Mock up improvements to KPI dashboard for placement sufficiency
<b>LCS Portal Relaunch</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Planning	Begin project planning for relaunch of digital portals for carers

### Policy & Training

Initiative	Status	Next Steps
<b>Fostering Handbook</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tri.x contract signed	Begin implementation planning with supplier

## Appendix 1

### Ethnicity of all approved carers 31 March 2025

<b>Foster &amp; Kinship Carer Ethnicity</b>	<b>Total Main &amp; Linked Carers</b>
Any Other Asian Background	7
Any Other Black Background	4
Any Other Ethnic Group	4
Any Other Mixed Background	4
Any Other White Background	29
Black African	4
Black Caribbean	4
Indian	2
Pakistani	2
White and Asian	1
White and Black African	2
White and Black Caribbean	1
White British	286
White Irish	1
Not obtained	7
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>358</b>

## Appendix 2

 [Panel annual report 24-25.docx](#)

## Appendix 3

[Fostering Improvement Programme Plan on a Page - Nov 24.pptx](#)

[Fostering Improvement Highlight report - June 2025.pptx](#)