

EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21 November 2025

Fostering

Report by Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is **RECOMMENDED** to note and provide any comments and recommendations on Oxfordshire's Fostering Annual report 24/25 and consider the fostering action plan for the year ahead.

Executive Summary

2. The Fostering Service operates under a robust framework of national legislation and standards including:
 - Children Act 1989 – Establishes the paramountcy principle: the child's welfare is the primary consideration in all decisions.
 - Care Standards Act 2000 – Provides the legal basis for regulating fostering services.
 - Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 – Sets out the operational requirements for fostering services.
 - National Minimum Standards (NMS) for Fostering Services – Defines the expected quality of care and service delivery.
3. The Fostering Services is responsible for recruiting, assessing, training and supervising Foster Carers ensuring they meet the national minimum standards and demonstrate the required childcare competencies. The fostering service undertakes a range of assessments including Initial Viability Assessments (IVAs), kinship assessments, Special Guardianship Order (SGO) assessments, and private fostering assessments. Fostering panels are convened in accordance with statutory regulations to review applications across all carer types. Practice is guided by Oxfordshire County Council's internal Children's Social Care Practice Standards and aligned with the Oxfordshire Children's Services Procedures Manual and Safeguarding Children Board guidance, ensuring consistency, quality assurance, and child-centred decision-making.
4. As part of our development plan in the last financial year, we introduced two new teams:

- The Kinship Matters Team; this team is a specialist team and was established to assess and support those family members or close friends who step up to care for children when parents are unable to. Every Kinship carer has a named Supervising Social Worker, has access to our Fostering Community Hub, that includes support groups and has access to the same training mainstream foster carers have access to.
 - The Placements Team, this team streamlines placement referrals and operates as a centralised unit responsible for, managing emergency and relief placements, matching children with the right foster carer, co-ordinating duty and crisis intervention; and being the conduit between Brokerage, Fostering and the Children's Teams.
5. These additions reflect our ongoing commitment to improving outcomes for children and enhancing support for carers across Oxfordshire.

Annual Report Overview

6. The Fostering Annual Report 2024–25 outlines the significant recruitment challenges facing Oxfordshire, reflecting a wider national crisis in attracting foster carers. It also sets out the planned actions for 2025–26, the service's core development priorities, and key achievements completed during the reporting period.
7. The Fostering Service set a target to increase the net number of foster carers households by 20 in the last financial year, as of 31st March 2025, the service was supporting 238 households, comprising of:
- **91 kinship households**, including 18 with temporary approval
 - **105 mainstream households** (short-term, long-term, parent & child, Oxfordshire Therapeutic Foster Care, Supported Lodgings, Mockingbird)
 - **42 households** approved for relief, short break, or emergency care
8. A total of **19 new foster carers** were approved in 2024/25, offering **27 beds** across various placement types:
- Short-term/long-term: 4 carers, 6 beds
 - Relief/Short Break: 8 carers, 12 beds
 - Supported Lodgings: 3 carers, 3 beds
 - Foster to Adopt: 4 carers, 6 beds

Challenges and Implications for Fostering

9. The challenges for fostering in the last financial year are as detailed below:
- Placement Losses were higher than the approvals, seeing 34 deregistration's in 2024/25.

- Recruitment shortfall, new approvals have not kept pace with the losses, resulting in a net decrease in placements for the last two financial years.
10. The Annual report highlights insufficient in-house provision for the following group of children and young people:
 - Adolescents
 - Sibling Groups
 - Parent and child
 - Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children
 - Children with disabilities (including short breaks)
 11. Oxfordshire requires 33 additional carers to meet the national average, this could enable 52 more in-house placements, that could serve to address the current shortfalls in point 9.
 12. To address the above the fostering service has set the following actions for 2025/26:
 - **Targeted Recruitment:** Focus on carers who can take single placements or older children to balance the profile.
 - **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.
 - **Utilisation Review:** Conduct a placement-matching audit to identify underused capacity.
 - **Retention Support:** Offer tailored support to carers on hold to encourage reactivation for those carers on hold.
 13. The fostering service is considering new approaches to improve recruitment and retention, including incentives such as council tax relief, which has been successfully introduced by other local authorities. Any potential loss in council tax revenue would be balanced by reduced reliance on costly external providers, such as Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs), and is expected to encourage more households to become foster carers.

Fostering Development Plan for 2025/26

14. The core development priorities for the fostering service this financial year are set out below and detailed in the annual report:
 - Policy and incentives
 - Placement matching and support
 - Kinship and Special Guardianship
 - Data and Digital Tools
 - Training for Foster Carers

15. This financial year the Fostering Service has moved from the Mockingbird model and developed the Fostering Community Hubs. The transition from the Mockingbird model was prompted by financial and structural concerns. The Fostering Community Hub was launched on 27th September 2025 as a more sustainable, inclusive and integrated support network for Oxfordshire foster carers. All OCC foster carers are automatically included in the Hub from the point of assessment, unless they opt out. The Fostering Community Hubs have nine experienced foster carers serving as Community Hub Leads supporting North, City, and South areas. A Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework tracks engagement, retention, and recruitment, as detailed below:

- 1-1 peer support
- Monthly support groups
- Arrange and facilitate 6 social events a year.
- Buddying with foster carers prior to approval.

16. This year the Fostering Service has developed a Carer Home Loan Policy with a proposed annual waiver to support retention of foster carers and increase placement sufficiency. This has been signed off by the Capital Programme Board. It is important to note that this is an invest to save; and the investment is protected by a legal charge placed on the properties.

17. We have two current foster carers moving through the new home loans policy, they are an in-house foster carer and a kinship carer. We have completed a cost benefit for the two applications currently in progress with building works. See indicative details below:

Mainstream foster carers

- Loan amounts up to £110k (Capital)
- Increase in placement sufficiency: minimum of 2 placements
- Annual revenue savings: £72k
- Savings after 5 years of fostering: £360k
- Savings after 10 years of fostering: £720k
- Payback period (when amount of loan is recouped via savings): 2 years

Kinship carers

- Loan amounts up to £60k (Capital)
- Increase in placement sufficiency: sibling group of 4 (placement would not be possible without the building works being completed, meaning the children could be separated from family)
- Annual cost avoidance (revenue): £144k
- Cost avoidance upon all 4 siblings having turned 18 years old: £720k
- Payback period (when amount of loan is recouped via cost avoidance): 1 year

18. A Fostering Friendly HR policy has been completed; and has been signed off by OCC SLT and Unison. The next step for the fostering service is to engage

local partners to become Fostering Friendly, this will be looked at as part of the child's first initiative.

19. The Fostering handbook has now moved to Tri-X which means that all foster carers have access to the handbook via a digital app, this means that all legislative updates will be automatic, and foster carers will receive notifications of such.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

20. Oxfordshire's fostering service plan aligns with the delivery of the council's corporate strategic priorities to:
 - Prioritise the health and wellbeing of residents
 - Support carers and the social care system
 - Create opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.
 - Work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.

Financial Implications

21. There are no financial implications arising directly from the Fostering Annual Report. Indicative savings / cost avoidance for home loan applications referenced above have been validated. There is no requirement for the council to commit any further financial resources towards fostering beyond what is currently committed.

Comments checked by:

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Legal Implications

22. There are no legal implications for the Local Authority.

Comments checked by:

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Staff Implications

23. There are no additional staff resources being requested by way of this report for the work outlined in the Annual Report.

Checked by:

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Equality & Inclusion Implications

24. There are no additional equality and inclusion implications.

Sustainability Implications

25. There is no current sustainability implications associated with the contents of this report.

Risk Management

26. The Fostering Improvement Programme Board provides strategic oversight and operational direction for the fostering service.

Lisa Lyons
Director of Children's services

Annex: Fostering Annual Report.

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