

## **Divisions Affected – All**

### **CABINET 27 January 2026**

#### **Fostering Report of Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
  - a) Note the recommendations contained in the body of this report and to consider and determine its response to the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and
  - b) Agree that, once Cabinet has responded, relevant officers will continue to provide each meeting of the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee with a brief written update on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations for 12 months, or until they are completed (if earlier).

### **REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND**

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the Education and Young People Overview & Scrutiny Committee requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and any recommendations.

### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

3. The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report on the fostering service and on the Fostering Annual Report 202/25 at its meeting on 21 November 2025.
4. The Committee would like to thank Cllr Sean Gaul, Cabinet member for Children and Young People, Lisa Lyons, the Director of Children's Services, Charlotte Davey, Assistant Director, and Julie McNally, Service Manager: Fostering, for attending to present the report and to answer the Committee's questions.

## SUMMARY

5. The Assistant Director opened the discussion by setting out the fostering service's responsibilities; it covered mainstream fostering, kinship care, relief carers, and special guardianship assessments. The service had seen a reduction in registered foster carers in 2024/25, mainly due to retirements and to foster carers adopting those already in their care. A Fostering Improvement Board had been formed in response to challenges identified and progress was being made.
6. The Director advised the Committee that the Council, like others nationally, had experienced a decline in foster carers. The Council had fewer fostering and residential beds compared to other areas. This was partly attributed to higher property costs which made it more challenging to attract independent providers. However, the Director set out that the service's offer was highly competitive, with remuneration and support packages comparable to those in London. There were also fostering-friendly policies, flexible and respite care, as well as enhanced support for kinship carers and those under special guardianship orders.
7. The Committee explored a number of areas in discussion including marketing and recruitment; kinship carers; standards of care; training and support; supervision.
8. The Cabinet member highlighted ongoing efforts to improve the fostering offer and emphasised the importance of councillors acting as advocates for the service. This would strengthen support for carers and enhance recruitment.
9. The Committee makes two recommendations, both relating to work the Council should continue to concentrate on in order to make fostering more attractive.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

10. A significant proportion of foster carers also work, and the Council is one of the members of the Fostering Network's Fostering Friendly Employers scheme. The Council now has a Fostering Friendly leave policy and the Committee was advised that the next step was to engage local partners to also become Fostering Friendly.<sup>1</sup> There was a recognition of the importance of employers needing to be aware of the particular challenges faced by foster carers and having policies and procedures in place which would ameliorate those.
11. The Committee was pleased to hear of the Cabinet member's personal commitment to promoting the benefits of Fostering Friendly Oxfordshire and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/get-involved/fostering-friendly-employers/fostering-friendly-employers/>

similarly of the enthusiasm officers had for working with organisations across the county to roll out the Fostering Friendly approach to more organisations. This would not only benefit foster carers themselves but would also directly benefit the Council in its delivery of the fostering service. The benefits would be tangible for both the Council, for its foster carers, and for those Children We Care For.

12. In order for it to come to fruition, there needs to be not only enthusiasm but also resource so that the Council can engage with partners to encourage and influence them to develop appropriate policies.

***Recommendation 1: That the Council should commit to 'Fostering Friendly Oxfordshire' and continue to work with district councils and other key stakeholders to achieve this.***

13. The Committee noted that the report to the Committee set out that the service was considering a number of new approaches to improve recruitment and retention – including incentives such as council tax relief. Whilst The Fostering Network is calling for a United Kingdom-wide, government-funded exemption,<sup>2</sup> the Committee also heard the Cabinet member say that such a proposal locally was an ambition – albeit one on the 'very ambitious' list.
14. The Committee recognised that, under the current local government arrangements, council tax relief (whether full or partial) would be complicated because council tax is not collected solely by the Council and so the decision could not fall solely to the Council. The question was briefly discussed and it was accepted that it would be a complex one to answer. However, the Committee agreed that it was one that should be explored in further detail to make an assessment as to whether it would be feasible.
15. It is reported that a quarter of local authorities in England offer some form of council tax exemption and 16% a full exemption<sup>3</sup>. The Committee made no comment on what level of exemption might be optimal and neither did it give a view on whether it would be feasible to implement in Oxfordshire. It did, though, agree that the Council should consider it further.

***Recommendation 2: That the Council should explore in more detail the possibility of a council tax-related offer for foster carers.***

## **FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

16. The Committee does not currently anticipate considering the fostering service again during the remainder of this municipal year.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/blogs/campaigning-for-council-tax-exemptions-for-foster-carers/>

<sup>3</sup> Also <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/blogs/campaigning-for-council-tax-exemptions-for-foster-carers/>

## LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

17. Under Part 6.2 (13) (a) of the Constitution Scrutiny has the following power:  
'Once a Scrutiny Committee has completed its deliberations on any matter a formal report may be prepared on behalf of the Committee and when agreed by them the Proper Officer will normally refer it to the Cabinet for consideration.
18. Under Part 4.2 of the Constitution, the Cabinet Procedure Rules, s 2 (3) iv) the Cabinet will consider any reports from Scrutiny Committees.

Anita Bradley  
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Annex: Pro-forma Response Template

Background papers: None

Other Documents: None

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