

<b>Major Review Working Title</b>	<b>Caring for Our Children: Enhancing Fostering Provision and Support</b>
Committee	Children, Families & Education Select Committee
Review Year	2025/26 MY

## 1. OBJECTIVES

### Aim of review

This review aims to assess the effectiveness of the new fostering offer in Hillingdon and will explore opportunities for improvement through a focus on recruitment and retention; support for foster carers; and outcomes and experiences of children in care.

The review will also assist in recruiting more foster carers; raising awareness of the benefits of fostering; and highlighting the positive outcomes it can have for young people.

The review also aims to ensure that the service is responsive, inclusive and aligned with Corporate Parenting responsibilities so that all children in care can live in stable, loving homes.

### Terms of Reference

1. To understand the needs and experiences of children in foster care through examining demographics, underrepresented groups, placement types, placement stability, educational attainment, wellbeing and emerging trends.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of current recruitment and retention strategies, and support available to foster carers, including the impact of the new fostering offer.
3. To identify barriers to fostering for potential carers and children in care, and to identify opportunities for improvement.
4. To formulate recommendations to Cabinet aimed at strengthening Hillingdon's fostering provision, thereby improving outcomes for children in care.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### Context

Foster care plays a vital role in providing a safe, stable and nurturing environment for children who cannot live with their birth families. The Council has a statutory duty to ensure high-quality care and support for both foster carers and children. Nationally, there is a shortage of foster carers, and local authorities are facing increasing pressure to meet the diverse needs of children in care.

## Scope

The review will focus on:

- Council-run fostering services and commissioned providers
- Recruitment and retention of foster carers
- Placement stability
- Outcomes for children in foster care (including their transition to independence/ Staying Close/ Staying Put)
- Support services for children in foster care including social work, health and education
- Support services for foster carers (e.g. Mockingbird) including training, respite and financial packages

## Known issues

- National shortage of foster carers
- Recruitment and retention challenges, particularly for carers of teenagers and children with complex needs, and the time needed to recruit new carers
- Limited awareness/ promotion of fostering opportunities
- Placement instability/ breakdowns
- Support and training for foster carers
- Transition planning for children leaving care

## Connected matters

- Corporate Parenting – ensuring the Council meets its responsibilities to children in care
- SEND Strategy – supporting children with additional needs in foster care
- Youth Justice – links between care experience and youth offending
- Education – attainment and attendance of children in care
- Equalities – ensuring diverse and inclusive fostering provision
- Health & wellbeing – safeguarding children in care

## Legislative context

### Key Legislation and Regulations:

- [Children Act 1989](#): outlines the responsibilities of local authorities in providing services for children in need.
- [Children Act 2004](#): emphasises five key outcomes: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic well-being.
- [Fostering Services \(England\) Regulations 2011](#): outlines the standards and requirements for fostering services.
- [Care Planning, Placement and Case Review \(England\) Regulations 2010](#): focuses on the planning, monitoring and review of children's placements in foster care.
- [Care Leavers \(England\) Regulations 2010](#): covers arrangements for children leaving foster care.

- [Children and Social Work Act 2017](#): establishes seven corporate parenting principles that local authorities must follow to ensure they act in the best interests of children in their care.
- [National Minimum Standards \(NMS\)](#): provides best practice guidance for fostering agencies, setting out the minimum expectations for their services and operations, [according to Simply Fostering](#).
- [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023](#): outlines essential guidelines for multi-agency collaboration to protect and promote the welfare of children.

#### Key Aspects of Fostering Legislation:

- **Safeguarding Children:**
  - A core principle of fostering legislation is the protection of children from harm and abuse. Foster carers are expected to provide a safe and nurturing environment, and fostering services have a duty to ensure the welfare of children in their care.
- **Support for Foster Carers:**
  - Fostering legislation recognises the vital role of foster carers and emphasises the need for them to receive adequate support, training, and information to enable them to provide effective care.
- **Placement and Review:**
  - Legislation outlines the process for placing children in foster care, including the assessment of foster carers, the development of care plans, and the regular review of placements to ensure they are meeting the child's needs.
- **Leaving Care:**
  - Legislation addresses the support and arrangements for young people leaving foster care, ensuring a smooth transition to adulthood.

#### Other Relevant Considerations:

- **Private Fostering:**
  - Separate guidance and regulations exist for private fostering arrangements, which involve children being cared for by someone who is not a close relative.
- **Health and Safety:**
  - Foster carers are expected to adhere to health and safety standards, including those related to fire safety, first aid, and medication management.
- **Behaviour Management:**
  - Fostering legislation and guidance address the management of children's behaviour in foster care, emphasising positive approaches and de-escalation techniques.

### **3. EVIDENCE GATHERING**

#### **Core intelligence required**

- Number of foster carers and children in care
- Demographics of foster carers and children in care
- Information on recruitment and retention practices
- Data on placement types and stability
- Feedback from foster carers and children in care

## Cabinet Members & Service relevant to this review

### Remit

Portfolio(s)	Directorate	Service Areas
Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education	Children's Services	Children's Social Care (incl. safeguarding & corporate parenting)
		Corporate Parenting Panel
		Prevention & Youth Justice (incl. youth services, stronger families and adolescent mental health)
		Education & SEND (incl. Adult & Community Learning, Skills, Lifelong Learning, Music Services and School Travel)
	Adult Services & Health	Children and Families Support Services (incl. Early Years and Children's Centres)

This Select Committee has also established a Panel to support strong oversight of the Council's corporate parenting responsibilities. The Committee may wish to engage the Panel in its work.

Discussions on draft or emerging recommendations may be undertaken with relevant Cabinet Members as per the Protocol on Overview & Scrutiny and Cabinet Relations approved by full Council.

### Potential witnesses and site visits

#### Internal witnesses:

- Children's Social Care
- Fostering Team
- Virtual School
- Participation Team
- Fostering & Permanence Panel representative

#### External witnesses:

- Foster carers
- Care experienced young people

#### Site visits:

- Fostering events - <https://discover.hillingdon.gov.uk/fostering-events>

### Initial Papers/ further reading

- Hillingdon Fostering Statement of Purpose ([Hillingdon Statement of Purpose Fostering update 2023 \(1\).pdf](#))
- Ofsted inspection reports
- Local Placement Sufficiency Strategy

## Lines of Enquiry

Specific lines of enquiry will be worked up prior to witness sessions.

1. Context and current landscape
  - i. What are the current demographics of foster carers and children in care?
  - ii. Which cohorts of young people are underrepresented in foster care?
2. The new fostering offer
  - i. What does the new fostering offer consist of?
  - ii. How does the new fostering offer compare to the previous offer?
3. Recruitment and retention
  - i. What are the current recruitment and retention strategies?
  - ii. What are the key challenges in recruiting and retaining foster carers?
4. Support and experience
  - i. How are foster carers supported and trained (including PACE/ safeguarding training)?
  - ii. What are the lived experiences of foster carers (including those in the mockingbird constellation) and children in foster care?
5. Placement stability and outcomes
  - i. How effective are placement matching and stability efforts?
  - ii. How can we improve placement stability and reduce placement breakdowns, and what procedures are in place for when placements break down?
6. Partnerships and cost effectiveness
  - i. How does Hillingdon work with the Foster with West London hub?
  - ii. What are the comparative costs and outcomes of in-house fostering vs independent fostering agencies and residential care?

### Some early ideas to consider:

1. Enhanced training and wellbeing support for carers
2. Peer mentoring schemes
3. Digital platform for fostering information and applications
4. Community engagement campaigns
5. Flexible financial support packages

## 4. REVIEW PLANNER

Proposed timeframe & milestones for the review:

Meeting Date	Action	Purpose/ theme	Witnesses/ officers attending
25 September 2025, 19:00	Agree Scoping Report	What do we need?	Democratic Services

13 November 2025, 19:00	Witness Session 1	Understanding fostering in Hillingdon	Children's Social Care Fostering Team Virtual School Fostering & Permanence Panel rep
16 December 2025, 17:30	Witness Session 2a (Private session)	Young peoples' experiences/ best practices	Children in care/ care experienced young people Participation Team Fostering & Permanence Panel rep
04 December 2025, 17:30	Witness Session 2b (Private session)	Foster carer experiences/ best practices	Foster carers Fostering & Permanence Panel rep
05 February 2026, 19:00	Findings, conclusions and recommendations	Drafting recommendations	Democratic Services
12 March 2026, 19:00	Approval of final report	Finalise proposals to Cabinet	Democratic Services
23 April 2026, 19:00	Target Cabinet reporting		

### Resource requirements

No financial assessment required at scoping stage. Any recommendations with budget implications will be discussed with Cabinet Members and the Leader.

### Equalities impact

The review will consider how to ensure inclusive access to fostering and reduce disparities in outcomes for children in care.

### Scrutiny Benefit

This review will:

- Improve outcomes for children in care
- Strengthen support for foster carers
- Promote joined-up working across services
- Drive service improvement and innovation
- Support future external inspections
- Support strategic priorities for children and families

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