

REVIEW BY THE CHILDREN, FAMILIES & EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE: *CARING FOR OUR CHILDREN: ENHANCING FOSTERING PROVISION AND SUPPORT*

Cabinet Member & Portfolio	Councillor Susan O'Brien, Cabinet Member for Children, Families & Education
Responsible Officer	Alex Coman, Children's Services
Report Author & Directorate	Ryan Dell, Democratic Services
Papers with report	Fostering review final report

HEADLINES

Executive summary

The Children, Families & Education Select Committee undertook a comprehensive review of Hillingdon's fostering service at a time of significant change and renewed ambition. With the new fostering offer now embedded, the Committee sought to understand how well the service was supporting young people, recruiting and retaining carers, and ensuring that placements were stable, informed and nurturing.

Through detailed witness sessions with officers, foster carers, and young people with lived experience, the Committee found a passionate service that delivers strong practice but faces clear pressures. Young people expressed the need for better communication, greater involvement in decisions and more consistent, personalised information when placements begin or change. Foster carers highlighted challenges around training, access to information, and specialised placements for young people with complex needs. Officers emphasised the progress made in recruitment, including innovative tools and increased enquiries, and the commitment to improving placement matching, training and peer support.

The Committee concluded that strengthening information pathways, enhancing specialist training, and expanding peer support networks would make a meaningful difference to both foster carers and young people. The review's recommendations focus on elevating the voice of the child, equipping carers with the right skills, and building a more connected fostering community, ensuring every child can thrive in a safe and loving home.

Putting our Residents First	This report supports our ambition for residents/ the Council of: Be / feel safe from harm
Delivering on the Council Strategy 2022-2026	This report supports our commitments to residents of: Thriving, Healthy Households

Financial Cost	There are no direct financial costs arising from the initial recommendations with potential future investment subject to development of an appropriate business case and funding strategy.
Select Committee	Children, Families & Education Select Committee.
Ward	N/A.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That:

- 1) the Select Committee's report and recommendations, which seek to support and provide further strategic direction on the Council's fostering offer, to ensure that young people have a safe place to live be welcomed and;
- 2) their implementation be taken forward by officers in consultation with the Cabinet Member Portfolio Holder, as set out in the report.

SELECT COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Enhancing Information and the Voice of Young People

1. Develop an 'Introduction Pack for Children' that provides Cared For Children with clear, age appropriate, and accessible information to help them feel prepared, reassured and supported when starting a new placement and, where possible, during placement moves;
2. Include a 'Voice of the Child' section in the 'All About Me' profiles;
3. Include 'Where Are They Now' stories on the Council's website, where Care Experienced Young People share their experiences, if they are comfortable and willing to do so;

Developing Specialist Training Pathways for Foster Carers

4. Review and develop the training programme to introduce specialist Foster Carer pathways, including pathways for carers specialising in supporting young people with complex needs. Include young people in co-produced training where appropriate; and

Strengthening Peer Support to Sustain Foster Placements

5. Review existing peer support initiatives for both Foster Carers and Cared for Children, and develop opportunities to strengthen engagement and increase participation.

Reasons for recommendations

The recommendations arising from this major review aim to support foster carers and young people in foster care, ensuring their wellbeing and development.

Alternative options considered/ risk management

The Cabinet could decide to reject some, or all, of the Committee's recommendations or pursue alternative routes by which to progress the objectives of the review.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Overview

Foster care plays an important role in providing safe homes for young people who are unable to live with their birth families. The Council also has a statutory duty to ensure high-quality care and support for both foster carers and young people. There is a national shortage of foster carers and the Council is facing increased pressure to meet the diverse needs of Cared for Children.

The Children, Families & Education Select Committee undertook this review at a critical moment for Hillingdon's fostering service. The service is undergoing major transformation, with a new fostering offer in place and a renewed focus on improving recruitment, retention, and support for foster carers, ultimately to secure better outcomes for the Borough's Cared for Children.

Hillingdon has seen a major rise in interest since launching the new fostering offer, with innovative recruitment tools such as the Care Friends app and work with the Foster with West London Hub. The service is expanding specialist placements, improving diversity among carers, and strengthening the training and support available.

Through a series of witness sessions, Members heard directly from officers, foster carers, and most powerfully young people with lived experience of care. Their contributions highlighted the strengths of Hillingdon's current approach but also revealed opportunities to improve the way young people are supported, how carers are trained, and how peer networks sustain placements.

The review found a passionate and committed workforce, foster carers who go above and beyond, and young people who were honest about what has worked well and where the system can do more. This Committee's review sets out practical recommendations designed to build on that commitment, strengthen relationships, and ensure every child has the stability and care they deserve. The full review report is set out in the Appendix.

People's voices were at the heart

During the review, young people described the importance of being listened to, understood, and prepared when entering or moving between placements. They told Members that information about them was sometimes inconsistent, and that carers did not always have the full picture. They also highlighted the value of supportive carers who treated them like family, but spoke openly about gaps in communication, mental health support, and the impact of placement changes.

Foster carers spoke of the pride and fulfilment fostering brings, but also the challenges, including managing complex needs, a lengthy assessment process, variable access to information, the need for more robust training, and limited peer support in high pressure moments. They strongly supported specialist training, better matching, and building stronger networks between carers.

Council officers acknowledged that demand is rising, especially for carers able to support adolescents and young people with additional needs. Stronger information pathways, better matching tools, and more peer support were identified as areas that would further enhance the offer.

The Committee's recommendations

Following the conclusion of the witness sessions, the Committee's findings identified common themes of enhancing information and the voice of young people; developing specialist training pathways for foster carers; and strengthening peer support to sustain foster placements.

The Committee, therefore, recommend to Cabinet to:

1. Develop an 'Introduction Pack for Children' that provides Cared For Children with clear, age appropriate, and accessible information to help them feel prepared, reassured and supported when starting a new placement and, where possible, during placement moves;
2. Include a 'Voice of the Child' section in the 'All About Me' profiles;
3. Include 'Where Are They Now' stories on the Council's website, where Care Experienced Young People share their experiences, if they are comfortable and willing to do so;
4. Review and develop the training programme to introduce specialist Foster Carer pathways, including pathways for carers specialising in supporting young people with complex needs. Include young people in co-produced training where appropriate; and
5. Review existing peer support initiatives for both Foster Carers and Cared for Children and develop opportunities to strengthen engagement and increase participation.

Officer comments how the Committee's recommendations can be implemented

Officers welcome the Select Committee's recommendations and consider them practical, proportionate and well aligned with the Council's existing fostering improvement programme and corporate parenting responsibilities.

The recommendations relating to enhancing information and the voice of young people are being taken forward through co production with Cared For Children and Care Experienced Young People. This includes developing an age appropriate and accessible introduction pack to help children feel informed and reassured when entering or moving placements, strengthening the use of "All About Me" profiles to better reflect the child's voice, and enabling young people who wish to do so to share their experiences through "Where Are They Now" stories. These actions build on existing participation activity and reinforce the Council's commitment to listening to, and learning from, lived experience.

The recommendation to develop specialist training pathways for foster carers will be progressed through a review of the current fostering training offer and alignment with the new national Fostering Reform and the move toward regionalised fostering provision. This will focus on ensuring carers are equipped with the skills and confidence to meet a wide range of needs, including supporting young people with more complex presentations. Where appropriate, young people will be involved in shaping and contributing to training content (for instance Walking in Our Shoes training), supporting a shared understanding between carers and those they care for.

In relation to strengthening peer support, officers are reviewing the current peer support arrangements for both foster carers and Cared For Children, with a view to increasing engagement and participation. This includes considering how existing networks and forums can be better promoted and supported, recognising the important role that peer relationships play in sustaining placements and reducing isolation.

Overall, the recommendations can be implemented within existing service structures and improvement activity, with ongoing oversight through regular engagement with the Cabinet Member Portfolio Holder.

Final thoughts

The Committee's review highlights a service with real ambition, one that has already made significant progress but is determined to go further. By elevating young people's voices, strengthening carers with the right skills, and building a stronger fostering community, these recommendations aim to create an environment where every child in Hillingdon can thrive.

Cabinet is invited to agree these proposals, which are both practical and rooted in lived experience, ensuring that as corporate parents, the Council continues to place children's wellbeing, stability and aspiration at the centre of its work.

Financial Implications

The implementation of the recommendation can be achieved within the existing budgetary envelope. Any future proposals requiring additional investment will be subject to the development of an appropriate business case and funding strategy, in line with the report.

RESIDENT BENEFIT & CONSULTATION

The benefit or impact upon Hillingdon residents, service users and communities

Implementation of the recommendations will help the Council to further support foster carers and young people, following implementation of the new fostering offer.

Consultation & Engagement carried out (or required)

The Committee sought a range of internal and external witness testimony, as set out in the report. This included sessions with officers, young people and foster carers.

Furthermore, the review report was presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel on 19 March 2026. The Panel commended the inclusion of the voice of the child and co-production in the recommendations. The young people noted that recommendation one should be expanded to include young people in all placement types, not just foster placements. While outside the immediate scope of this review, this is something that officers are advised to look into. Young people also suggested that the information packs should also be written and reviewed by the young people.

CORPORATE CONSIDERATIONS

Corporate Finance

There are no other financial considerations to be brought to the attention of Members at this stage, other than those highlighted in the financial implications section.

Legal

There are no legal impediments to implementing the recommendations set out within the report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Nil