



NORTH SOMERSET FOSTERING STRATEGY – 2019 - 2021

By: Dawn Newton and Helen Caldwell
Directorate: People and Communities



Contents

1. Introduction
2. Aims and Objectives
3. Statistics for young people and foster carers
4. Summary of Recruitment activity
5. Recruitment
6. How are we going to improve our recruitment process and the number of approved foster carers 2019/20?
7. Key changes that would support and strengthen our capacity to recruit
8. Monitoring, Progress, Reporting and Evaluation
9. Conclusion



1. Introduction

North Somerset Council have high aspirations for our children in foster care. We want to make sure the children we look after are receiving the best possible care. We want to provide them with, love, warmth, understanding and quality care. At the time of writing this report North Somerset Council has 241 Children and young people who are looked after, between the ages of 0-17.

Local Authorities are required to ensure they have an effective recruitment sufficiency strategy in place to continue recruitment and development of foster carers. We are responsible for ensuring there are sufficient placements available to meet the diverse needs of our children. This document outlines North Somerset Councils' recruitment strategy in response to the assessed local context and need of our children.

The fostering recruitment team is responsible for the recruitment, assessment and retention of foster carers with the aim of ensuring a sufficiency of suitable placements to promote the best outcomes for our children who are looked after. Our aim is to recruit a range of carers that reflects the diversity of both our local community and young people in North Somerset who can provide a range of short-term, long-term and respite placements. Our aim is to have significant majority of our children looked after to be cared for within North Somerset by North Somerset foster carers, providing local placements for local children.

We have high aspirations for our foster carers. We want to develop a fostering service which is the envy of neighbouring authorities and independent fostering agencies.

Legal Context

The national minimum standards, together with regulations on the placement of children in foster care, such as the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, form the basis of the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 for the conduct of fostering services. The Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services (July 2013) also underlies our work.

Principles

The following principles underpin all our work with children and young people, and the foster carers with whom they are placed:

- i. Children are best brought up in their own birth family wherever it is safe to do so;



- ii. Families are supported through difficult times to fulfil their parental responsibilities and meet the needs of their children;
- iii. When it is not possible to support a child in their birth family safely, the child's wider network of family and friends is considered first;
- iv. The views and feelings of children are taken into account, and influence all decisions about their lives;
- v. Whilst every effort is made to prevent a child from becoming looked after, once that decision is made every effort is then made to identify the best care placement within the resources available;
- vi. The primary objectives of a care placement are to safeguard a child's welfare and to improve their outcomes;
- vii. Every effort is made to support stable care placements and to help the child to achieve emotional permanence;
- viii. Placement planning, the recruitment of carers and procurement of placements from the independent sector reflect the wide range of children's needs, including heritage, culture and religion, disability and ethnicity.

2. Aims and objectives

Valuing our foster carers, children and young people

Valuing young people

'For too many children and young people, their experience of care is that of something which is done to them, not with them. While legislation and Government guidelines encourage placement stability and involvement of young people in decision-making about their care and outline a young person's entitlement to sibling contact and advocacy services, application of these guidelines is currently lacking. There must be consistency of practice, so that all young people are able to benefit from an appropriate and positive experience of foster care.'



Valuing foster carers

'Foster carers do not always receive the respect and recognition they deserve. They perform a remarkable and invaluable service for thousands of young people.'

House of Commons Education Committee: 'Fostering' First Report of Session 2017-19.

The aims and objectives of the recruitment strategy are as follows:

- To improve local placement choice and stability for children and young people in North Somerset.
- To recruit for a diverse population of carers, with an emphasis on those who can offer homes to teenagers, sibling groups, young people from black and minority ethnic groups and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- To increase the number of North Somerset foster carers for all children and reduce the need for independent fostering agencies and residential care placements.
- To provide placements of the highest quality that meet and reflect the complex and varying needs of our young people.
- To ensure that children and young people's welfare, safety and needs are at the centre of our fostering process, by supporting and encouraging young people and foster carers to take a central role in our recruitment processes.
- To ensure that carers who come forward are valued through fair treatment without prejudice, transparency with respect and that enquiries are managed promptly, sensitively with transparent eligibility criteria.
- To recruit and support carers who can understand the emotional needs of children who are looked after and are able to meet these needs throughout their childhood through sensitive therapeutic re-parenting.
- To recruit foster carers who will be able to provide a range of different placement options for children depending on their assessed needs including Emergency Placements, Respite Placements, short and long-term placements.



- To increase our proportion of supported lodgings hosts to provide care for children who are post 16 and wish to live in a supportive but more independent environment.
- To enable children and young people to live close to their birth family, schools, hobbies and their community of interest. For children and young people to be able to maintain family and community links safely, that supports their happiness, resilience and identity.

We believe that North Somerset has the capacity and the will to care for our young people and it is our role to highlight the need for foster carers and create an efficient and effective process to enable our children to be cared for by loving local families.

3. Statistics for young people and Foster Care

National Context

The number of children looked after is continuing to rise. The number of children looked after in England is up 4% to 78,150 at 31 March 2019. The number of children starting to be looked after during the year is down 2% to 31,680. The number of children ceasing to be looked after during the year is down 2% to 29,460.

Children ceasing to be looked after during the year due to adoption fell by 7% to 3,570 - this continues the drop seen last year and is down from a peak of 5,360 in 2015

The shortage of foster care households is a well-documented on-going concern both locally and nationally. There are several factors that appear to have impacted upon the supply of sufficient foster carers. These include:

- Higher housing costs mean less families have a spare bedroom.
- Higher housing costs mean adult children tend to live at home longer as they cannot afford their own accommodation.
- Many people who would have traditionally fostered are now looking after elderly relatives due to the cost of residential care.
- High mortgages mean couples often both work full time, meaning they cannot offer the support needed by young children



North Somerset Local Context

Demographic analysis of the Children Looked After cohort throughout the 2017/20 period shows that:

- The number of children looked after per 10,000 remains steady;
- We have slightly more than our statistical neighbours and less than the national average;

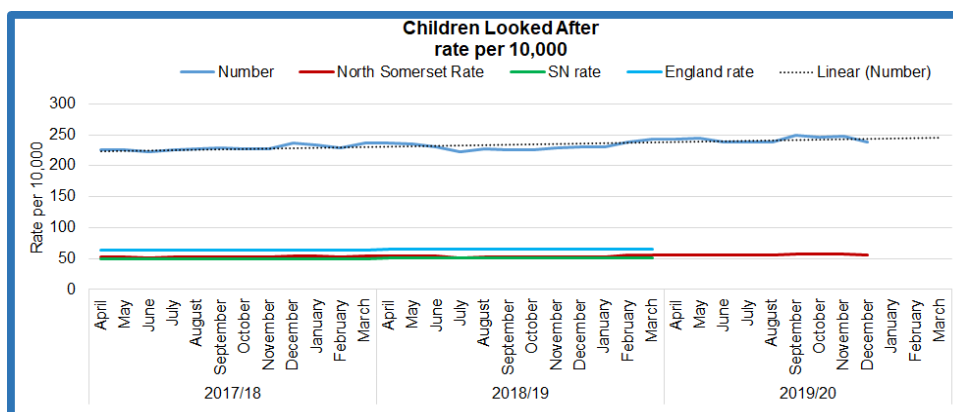


Figure 1: Number and rate of children looked after at any point during the month (starts and ceases)

On average over the last two years, 7 children start to be looked after a month and a similar number cease. This explains why the number of Children Looked After in North Somerset has remained fairly steady.

In 2019/20, September saw the highest number of starts (12), whilst October and December saw the highest number of ceases (11 and 14).

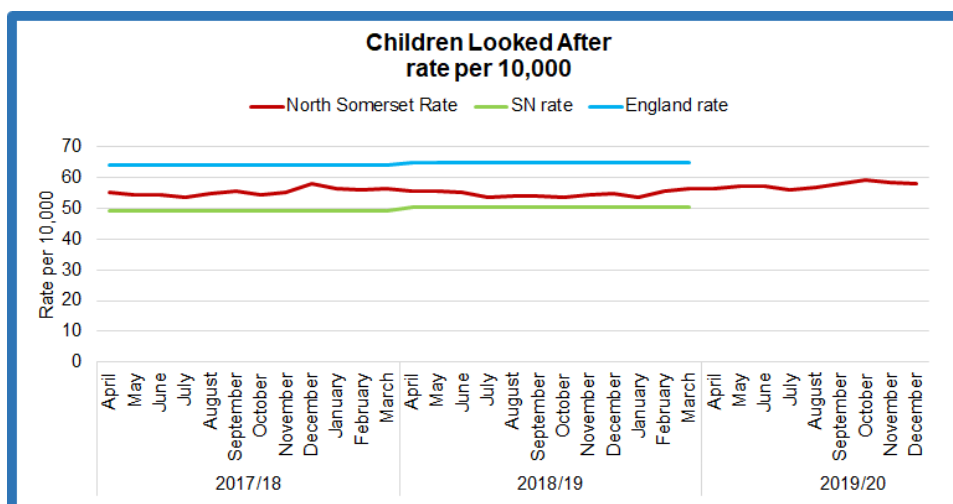


Figure 2: Number and rate of children looked after at any point during the month



- The split between males and females is about equal.
- The percentage of BME children who are looked after is slightly higher than would be expected as a comparison against the population (compared against Census 2011).

The main reasons for children becoming looked after are:

- Abuse or neglect
- Family in acute stress
- Family dysfunction
- Absent parenting
- Disability
- Parent illness or disability

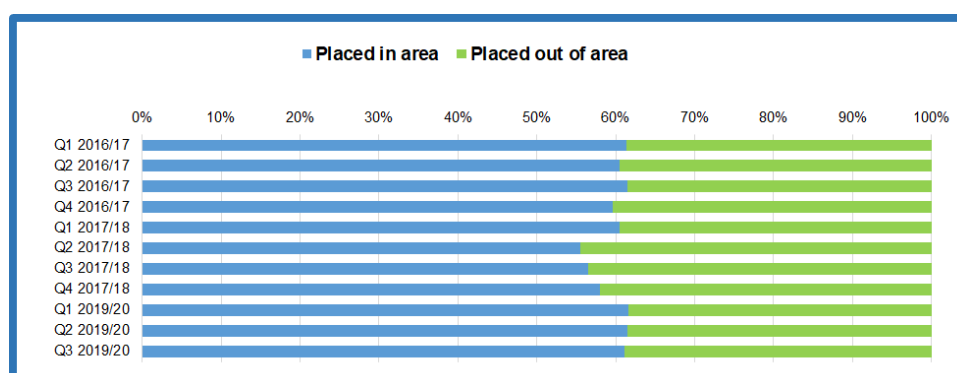


Figure 3: Placements in and out of North Somerset area (% of all placements)

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

Historically, the receiving Local Authority for found unaccompanied asylum-seeking children would retain responsibility for their welfare, accommodation and care as Children Looked After and Care Leavers when those young people left care. From the 1st July 2016 the National Transfer Scheme came into effect meaning receiving local authorities have powers to transfer their duty of care for some unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to other identified Local Authorities to reduce pressure on those with high populations of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Each Local Authority has a quota of young people based upon their size which is equivalent to 0.07% of their total child population, and for North Somerset, this equates to 30 UASC children.

Analysis

The number of children and young people looked after in North Somerset has increased slightly. Previously numbers have remained relatively static, and there has been a slight reduction in



children experiencing 3 or more placement moves in a period of 12 months (28 children in 2017/18, compared to 30 children in 2016/17) this figure remains of concern. Multiple placement moves have an extremely detrimental impact upon all aspects of young people's development. Children who experience multiple moves are likely to develop even more complex needs and lose links to their local community, reducing the likelihood of stability for the future. One of the aims of the recruitment strategy is to increase foster carer sufficiency, diversity and skills base to enable more children to be matched with foster carers in a timely way to reduce placement moves for children in care.

The age of children looked after has changed significantly, with young people over the age of 13 making up 52% of our looked after population in comparison to 31% in 2016. Children under the age of 5 now make up 18% of our looked after children, in comparison to 44% in 2016.

These findings will inform and underpin the recruitment strategy.

Profile of North Somerset Foster Carer Population

As of February 2020, North Somerset foster carers provide 77 children and young people with homes, this is in comparison to 65 being cared for within Independent Foster Agency and 12 within residential provision, 3 of which include education.

All our foster carers are currently of White British origin. A key aim in our recruitment strategy is to successfully recruit carers from black and minority ethnic groups. This is a priority as 15% of the young people we look after are from black and ethnic minority groups and we wish to recruit a diverse range of foster carers to meet the needs of our children. It also presents a challenge given the relative demographic make up of the adult population of North Somerset.

Whilst the aging population of our carers is positive in relation to retention, in 2016, 28 of our foster carers were over the age of 60, compared with 33 carers in 2018. We can anticipate some of our carers wishing to retire in the coming years, which will put an additional pressure on our service.

4. Summary of North Somerset Recruitment

Research tells us that an effective fostering recruitment campaign must keep a continuous presence within the community, however there was a lack of recruitment activity during 2014/15, which impacted upon the number of approvals.

During April 2015 the fostering recruitment approach was transformed, and several changes were made to address our recruitment needs. Whilst this strategy was successful in attracting enquiries, this did not result in a proportionate number of approvals.



It was noted that all the Local Authorities in the South West Regional Fostering Forum (9 in total), had invested in a Marketing and Recruitment Officer. All fostering recruitment research suggests that this is a prerequisite to effective fostering recruitment.

North Somerset responded to this identified need and in November 2019 by recruiting a Marketing Officer to raise the profile and awareness of Fostering in North Somerset. The Marketing Officer, although relatively new in post, is already having a positive impact by raising the profile of foster care and highlighting recruitment needs to a wider audience.

There has been increased information sharing through Social Media and advertisements, and initiatives to get to know local business and religious venues. We have also raised the profile of Foster care within the council, asking colleagues how they could assist in supporting those children and young people we care for, either directly or through increased support to our fostering families. For example, a recruitment banner on Tesco's roundabout was recently funded via donations from local business and from each North Somerset Councillor.

The Marketing Officer is working with businesses, the council and it's partners, and the wider community to establish what they are able to offer both the children and young people and foster carers. There is a very old proverb which says '*it takes a village to raise a child*' and our challenge to everyone reading this report is to ask what you could do to help care for those children and young people who, through no fault of their own, find themselves being cared for outside of their immediate family. We need more fostering caring families, increased employment opportunities for our care leavers, and more opportunities for children and young people in our care to mirror what we would hope our own children would experience in their family and wider family homes.

The question is WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Recruitment Strategy 2018-20

In North Somerset we aim to recruit carers in line with research findings. Research by Scott and Duncan (2013) (Department of Education) revealed characteristics of people who might be drawn to fostering. These people are often active within their local community (altruistic), have experience of fostering (either themselves or knowing a family that foster), often practice a religion and often work in higher managerial, skilled manual or voluntary work.

Subsequent research undertaken by The Fostering Network and reported in 'Why Carers Care' (2015) identified that 81% of approved foster carers shared a similar value base. These people have become known as '*pioneers*' and they tend to advocate for fairness, a keen sense of right and wrong and are generally concerned for society.

These findings evidence the importance of recruitment strategies that emphasise that fostering is worthwhile and makes a real difference to young people and benefits our



community as a whole. It also suggests we might consider targeted recruitment eg. reaching out to religious groups and community groups within both the voluntary and business sectors.

Research by SCIE tells us successful fostering recruitment campaigns:

- Target a specific need eg. teenagers and siblings
- Use word of mouth strategies – which are most effective
- Involve close collaboration with experienced carers to promote fostering
- Ensure that systems are in place for following up enquiries promptly
- Use local media and articles in local press
- Are part of on-going, consistent recruitment drives
- Use social media effectively
- Maintain a consistently high local profile
- Are supported by a specialist worker with marketing and media experience

Social Care Institute for Excellence 'Recruiting Foster Carers. 2004

Within North Somerset we aim to utilise all of the above approaches within our current fostering recruitment activity. From 1st April 2020 we will also reintroduce specific separate payment for Birthday, Christmas and holiday monies. This money was divided into weekly payments, these weekly payments have not been removed from the Foster Carers allowance but have had become an uplift in allowances over and above the national standards.

5. Recruitment Activity

We have undertaken a range of recruitment activities. These include:

- Social media postings giving targeted messages relating to the needs of the Local Authority and linked to research findings e.g. around why people might feel reluctant to come forward to foster.
- Regular articles in the council produced magazine North Somerset Life, which reaches all households and also has a regular digital edition, alongside a few local



press releases giving targeted messages relating to the needs of the Local Authority linked to research findings targeting those '*pioneers*' most likely to apply.

- The introduction of a £50 incentive for staff that introduce a new carer who is subsequently approved at panel.
- Attendance at a number of community events.
- Posters and displays in our main buildings, libraries etc.
- Regular coffee mornings and open evenings advertised through Facebook. These events are attended by recruitment social workers, foster carers and for open evenings, young people who are looked after.
- Provision of Skills to Foster courses, all of which include direct delivery by foster carers, looked after young people, social workers, Consult etc.
- We have taken advantage of staff communication opportunities such as The Knowledge, Noticeboard and creating displays in our main office bases at the Town Hall and Castlewood.
- Beginning to develop positive relationships with those who might support our efforts e.g. Weston PRIDE, The Multicultural Friendship Association, Weston Hospital, Weston College and Costa Coffee.
- Using local advertising opportunities such as Weston Playhouse
- Developing positive relationships with our communications colleagues. Ensuring they have the necessary information to support our key messages.
- Attending and sometimes hosting quarterly meetings with the South West Fostering Consortium, meeting with nine Local Authorities to share recruitment ideas and activities.
- Ensuring we respond promptly to enquiries and offer home visits to those who are ready to foster, as well as those who might come forward in the near future.

6. How are we going to improve of our recruitment process and increase the numbers of approved foster carers 2019/21?

We would like to be able to provide a local, in house, North Somerset foster family for each child or young person who needs one. In the long term this would mean doubling our fostering households and recruiting an additional 60 carers. Whilst this is hugely ambitious, this is our overarching goal.



We now have a Marketing Officer and in May 2019 North Somerset Council Fostering Service, with additional funding from the Trusted Relationships Team, made the decision to bring the Fostering Network's Mockingbird Family Model to the area.

An implementation steering group was established with a variety of agencies in attendance each month to successfully launch the programme within North Somerset.

The Mockingbird Programme is an extended family model of fostering that builds trusted, strong and authentic relationships between foster carers, children who are looked after, social care and birth families. The Fostering Network's research into the effectiveness of the Mockingbird Family Model shows greater stability and placement longevity for children living in foster families and provides them with lifelong support and relationships. The research also shows the programme helps foster carers to feel more supported and improves foster carer recruitment and retention.

At the heart of the Mockingbird Programme are relationships and communication. Building trusted, strong and authentic relationships between the adults, children and young people within and between each foster family offers each person the support, care and time they may need and replicates an extended family model.

The model consists of Constellations of up to ten foster families and 18 children and young people who are supported by the Hub Home Foster Carer who offers support, guidance, sleepovers, monthly activities and training or events to the group of foster carers and children within the Constellation. A Constellation can also support the birth or adopted children of the foster carers as well as support children who are looked return to their birth families.

In December 2019 North Somerset Council Fostering Service launched their first Constellation which is currently supporting 9 foster families made up of 18 foster carers, 17 children looked after, 3 birth or adopted children, 1 care leaver and 1 young person who has left care and is now living with his grandparent. We are already witnessing the increased stability and support network this model provides.

With the success of the first Constellation and launch of Mockingbird within the service, North Somerset Fostering Team will be launching two more Constellations by 12th May 2020 and a 4th Constellation by December 2020 and will include Kinship Foster Carers, with the aim of every foster family and kinship foster family being part of a Mockingbird Constellation.

We are proud to be leading the way within the South West where we are the first Local Authority to implement this model. The aim is for every fostering family within North Somerset to be part of a Mockingbird constellation which will culminate in increase of fostering caring provision, increasing stability of placements, increasing the support foster cares receive and building extended fostering families for those children we care for.

Assistance from various Local Authority Departments



To further utilise our strength as a Local Authority, we ask all departments within the Local Authority to make a pledge to support our recruitment endeavours. Whilst some directorates might only be able to offer limited support - such as including our logo on their headed paper - others might offer innovative ways they might support us to engage and enhance the public's interest and awareness of fostering. Simple things such as inclusion of recorded messages promoting fostering when people call the Local Authority or sending a leaflet to those who retire could have real impact on the number of Foster Carers locally.

Harnessing the efforts of the local authority holistically is a cost-effective method of getting our message out and promotes our whole council approach to supporting children looked after.

Examples of how each directorate might assist are as follows:

- Keep our children and foster carers at the for front of your thinking and planning and keep asking yourself what can you do? What can you pledge?
- Consider any discounts that could be offered to our Foster Carers, or free/reduced cost opportunities for our children.
- Always think of Care Leavers when opportunities for employment or local activities arise. Let's help them get into work.
- Could you provide free signage space?
- Can you provide leaflet and poster distribution and display?
- Can spaces you manage or support be used to host free events?
- Could you prioritise fostering households for services and discounts?
- Could you carrying fostering messages and contact details on headed paper, council tax bills, publicity leaflets or vehicles?
- Could you help to expand our joint working program to target underrepresented groups?
- Could your staff attend awareness training so that they can signpost to our service?
- Could approved foster carers and supported lodgings hosts benefit from reductions in Council Tax which are already in place for care leavers and single people?

Key partner agencies - Health, Education, YOT, Police



We ask our partners to consider how they too could support our recruitment efforts, including:

- Reciprocal social media posts etc
- Free stalls at community events
- Committing to campaigns that 'tick over' without requiring additional staff resources.
- Features and articles about fostering to be routinely included in internal bulletin systems

Community groups, voluntary organisations and religious groups

- Reciprocal event promotion
- Developing partnerships with local religious groups who might support our efforts and enable us to access those who share the values of our service. (Fostering Better Outcomes, Department of Education July 2018)
- Continue to develop our relationships with under represented groups e.g. the Multi-Cultural Friends Association, Black and Minority Ethnic Network, LGBTQ Pride

Local business

- We have developed a relationship with Costa Coffee, and they are happy to provide free refreshments for up to 4 open evenings a year, in addition to coffee information mornings. Although not required, in return we boost events on Facebook, and have advertised Costa support within our staff briefing information. Costa Coffee have been amazing with the support they have offered us and it has made a big difference in how we are able to meet those interested in fostering.

7. Key Changes

Key Publicity Messages

We need to ensure we are giving the public key messages about fostering so that each opportunity to engage with the public is effective and worthwhile. We also need to communicate the exciting potential of our status as a Mockingbird fostering authority.

We need to recruit a more diverse range of carers who reflect the needs of our children. 15% of our looked after children are currently from black and ethnic minority groups, however all our carers currently are of white British origin and therefore do not reflect the cultural diversity of our children looked after.

We need to recruit for teenagers (who make up 52% of our looked after children population).



We need to recruit carers willing to care for sibling groups, as research (What Works in Adoption and Foster Care, Barnados.org.uk) tells us keeping siblings together is linked with successful outcomes.

We need to recruit carers for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, (especially through promotion of our Supported Lodgings Scheme).

We need to give key messages that show the worthwhile nature of fostering and tap into the motivation of our target audience - our '*pioneers*' We need to promote the worthwhile opportunity fostering provides, highlighting applicant's capacity to make a real difference to our community and the plight of our vulnerable children.

We need to give key messages that challenge the reason people are reluctant to apply to foster. 'Myth Busting' messages that focus on common concerns eg. can fostering be achieved alongside raising your own children, fear that applicants will not be accepted because of minor issues, clarity around differing schemes to assure people they will have time to be a carer or host.

We need to give key messages about the very necessary support and training encapsulated in our fostering offer.

We need to ensure our messages draw on our strengths as a fostering agency and the support that we provide to carers through our supervising social workers, training and access to our therapeutic CONSULT service.

With an increase in Fostering Families we can offer better matching opportunities for foster carers than independent agencies, as our fostering offer extends to carers who can look after children of all ages. This means carers, especially those with younger birth children can undertake post adoption/reunification work with babies and toddlers, in addition to short- and longer-term care for primary school age children. Fostering for North Somerset enables fostering families to 'grow' with us, with more opportunities to care for children alongside their own family.

There is also a strong sense of community pride associated with fostering for the Local Authority, which forms part of our key messages.

8. Monitoring, Progress, Reporting and Evaluation

Initial contacts are monitored, detailing the enquirers date of birth, location, ethnicity and the source of their recruitment contact. This information is used to report on the contact activity and monitor and evaluate the success of specific advertising campaigns and initiatives.

Systems are also in place to track the progress of initial contacts, and understand whether they lead to subsequent enquiries, initial home visits, an invitation to skills to foster training and assessment.



Due to the shortage of foster carers in general, our recruitments offer is currently open to potential carers who might wish to offer long-term, short-term or respite fostering to children of all ages. Regardless, the specific information gathered enables us to have an in-depth understanding of priority in respect of the recruitment and assessment of foster carers.

9. Conclusion

We are excited about being the first in the South West to implement the Mockingbird model within North Somerset Fostering. Even though we are in the early process of implementing this model we are already seeing a positive difference in the support foster carers are given being a part of this model.

It is our belief that Mockingbird will encourage new foster carers to see North Somerset as the best place to be a foster carer. We also believe by delivering the Mockingbird approach throughout North Somerset, we will provide a level of support to our fostering families which is not replicated elsewhere in the South West, potentially making North Somerset the best and most supportive place to be a fostering family. We want to see Independent Foster Carers choose to join us in North Somerset because we provide a better support service and improved outcomes for our children and young people.

We understand we are at the very early implementation of change to our fostering service, but this coupled with the newly appointed Marketing Officer will, we believe, provide a solid base for our fostering service to grow.

We may not be able to fully evidence the potential change Mockingbird or the Marketing Officer are making at this time but this should become apparent within the next 12-18 months.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

What is your pledge to those children who need a stable and solid Fostering Service? A Service in their Local Area which will ensure they are able to feel safe, feel loved and feel valued. A place where they can be supported to reach their full potential.