

FOSTER FOR PLYMOUTH: FOSTER CARER RECRUITMENT UPDATE



INTRODUCTION

Foster for Plymouth, Plymouth City Council's Fostering Team, have revitalised and enhanced their approach to Foster Carer Recruitment in order to attract and recruit more foster carers and increase our in-house fostering sufficiency.

This is one element of the Family Homes for Plymouth Children programme which has been established to improve practice, placement sufficiency and outcomes for children and young people when they do need to be in our care because they cannot be safeguarded in their own family and friends' network. We believe that children and young people in care should, wherever possible, grow up in a family setting with foster carers and as close as possible to their home area to enable them to maintain relationships, access their social worker, maintain their school placements and access local health and therapeutic services, to support good outcomes. This also enables a more supported and local transition to independence. The impact of more in-house foster carers will also reduce pressure on the children's placement budget by increasing the proportion of children placed with in house foster carers compared to Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) which are a higher cost to the Local Authority and reducing the number of children placed in residential children's homes. Increasing the number of in house foster homes in and close to Plymouth will also reduce the financial and environmental costs of supporting children placed at a distance from Plymouth by reducing the amount of travel and associated time taken for social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers to carry out their statutory duties as well as supporting parents and wider family members to maintain relationships with their children. To achieve this we must increase the numbers of in house foster carers and placements.

The approach to increasing fostering sufficiency is multifaceted, this involves not just recruiting new foster carers but retaining, supporting and developing our existing foster carers to look after children with more complex needs or challenging behaviours.

The approach includes an improved Financial, Support and Retention Offer to our existing Foster Carers, our work with the Regional Fostering Hub (Fostering South West), the development of Plymouth's first Mockingbird constellation, an increased, innovative and creative marketing activity to attract new foster carers and those considering transferring to the Local Authority from Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) and developing our local network of support through partners and communities.

FINANCIAL, SUPPORT AND RETENTION OFFER TO OUR EXISTING FOSTER CARERS

The improved Financial Offer to Our Foster Carers was approved by Cabinet earlier this year and has been warmly welcomed by our Foster Carers. With the addition of the Council Tax Allowance, Foster for Plymouth allowances are now much more comparable with IFAs.

"Our Commitment To You: Plymouth City Council's Support and Retention Offer to Our Foster Carers 2024/2025" has been co-designed with our Foster Carers and is presented to Cabinet today.

REGIONAL FOSTERING HUB (FOSTERING SOUTH WEST)

Fostering South West represents a partnership of 15 Local Authority Fostering services across the south west of England collaborating to actively recruit essential prospective foster carers. The Hub is funded by the DfE and brings together a collective in-depth experience and knowledge of their local communities, the needs of families, children and the young people in their care. The Hub is committed to work together and share resources to give foster carers and children in care the best possible experiences of fostering with their Local Authorities.

The Fostering South West Hub went live on the 28 April 2024 after a period of collaborative design and implementation, with the formal launch event taking place on 5 November 2024.

Fostering South West works in partnership with the Local Authority where prospective carers live or where they have indicated they wish to foster to ensure that from initial enquiry to assessment and beyond, they have the information they need and feel supported in their journey.

Through collaboration, the aim of the Hub is to grow the number of fostering households through shared marketing and recruitment activity, taking advantage of a dominant market presence in the south west. The focus is on the difference that Local Authority Fostering Agencies can make to the vulnerable children and young people in need in local communities.

Foster for Plymouth have been actively involved in the Hub design, set up, implementation and review.

The implementation of the Hub in April 2024 coincided with Foster for Plymouth's launch of the improved Financial Offer, which was accompanied by a significant amount of marketing activity and attracted local press coverage. As such the uplift in fostering enquiries this financial year could be attributable to one or both of these activities. However we can see this increase has been sustained throughout the financial year.

In terms of the positive impacts of a regional approach and the national voice of Hubs across the country using the term "Foster for Your Local Authority", this is clearly having an impact. It is a powerful message and one we certainly are proud to be part of.

Fostering South West Website: www.fosterwithyourlocalcouncil.org.uk }

MOCKINGBIRD

As part of the DfE funding related to the Regional Fostering Hub, Plymouth City Council received funding to implement their first Mockingbird Constellation.

Mockingbird is a global award winning programme led by The Fostering Network in the UK. It delivers sustainable foster care through an evidence-based model structured around the support and relationships an extended family provides. The model nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community. Each constellation is led by a hub home carer and liaison worker, the constellation offers vital peer support and guidance alongside social activities and sleepovers to strengthen relationships and permanence.

The Liaison Worker is in post, the Hub Home Carers have been recruited and trained allowing the constellation to be established. The formal launch of Mockingbird in Plymouth taking place on Friday

1 November 2024 with a celebratory event with Foster Carers, Children and Young People kindly hosted by Hellermann Tyton.

AN INCREASED, INNOVATIVE AND CREATIVE MARKETING ACTIVITY

In order to attract prospective foster carers and encouraging those already fostering for IFAs to transfer to the Local Authority we have increased our marketing activity and developed this in line with feedback from prospective foster carers and our fostering community about what engaged them and attracted them to apply. What we know is that the journey to becoming a foster carer is a long one, people may consider fostering for a long time before making an enquiry and indeed may start the journey more than once. The most effective marketing will provide a 'drip feeding' approach, ensuring that anyone who might consider fostering is regularly reminded of the rewards, the support available and of who to contact. Targeted marketing is effective in this regard and this is effectively used through social media channels. What is really clear from those prospective foster carers who continue through assessment to approval, is that word of mouth and the voices of children, young people and foster carers are our most powerful marketing tool. The improved financial, support and retention offers ensure that foster carers feel supported, valued and pass on that positivity to others. Foster carers are also rewarded with a thank you when someone they recommend is approved, a small but important token of our appreciation.

Working with representatives from 4 local businesses, the Foster for Plymouth Team are developing an even more ambitious marketing strategy and plan for 2025/2026. This will be an invest to save proposal as a wider reach will draw more applicants but require investment in marketing and staff resources. Within this we aim to establish a care experienced digital marketing apprenticeship within the Foster for Plymouth team, which will enhance the marketing activity and offer a unique opportunity to a care experienced young person.

DEVELOPING OUR LOCAL NETWORK OF SUPPORT THROUGH PARTNERS AND COMMUNITIES

Maximising our marketing activity depends on our reach. Through our networks we have engaged a range of local businesses and our partners to spread the word about fostering in their workplaces, public places and communities. A calendar of engagement activities is in place and is growing as our network grows.

“EVERYTHING” FOSTERING FILM COLLABORATION

This year Foster for Plymouth joined a growing partnership of Councils and Children's Trusts across the Country to produce a short film promote local authority fostering. This is nationally and professionally produced film which was launched nationally on 17 October 2024 at the Everyman Cinema in Birmingham. Through the collaboration, each participating Local Authority is provided with a branded copy of the film, some short clips and stills to use in their own marketing campaigns.

“Everything” follows a fostering family and celebrates the long term impact that fostering can have for everyone involved and the importance of relationships and connections that can be lifelong.

Foster for Plymouth hosted a Premiere of the Film on 18 October 2024, following up on the national launch. During the event the film was screened and guests from the fostering community, children's

social care, partners and local businesses were privileged to hear from a group of care experienced children and young people as well as Foster Carers and the Fostering Team. Guests were provided with a bag of promotional materials to take away and time for networking.

The Foster for Plymouth social media launch took place at the end of the event and the film is being widely shared across social media channels. Plymouth Arts Cinema have kindly agreed to share a version of the film within their trailers and Dartmoor Zoo have agreed to include our campaigns on their screens within their café area. In the first 10 days of sharing the film this has already directly resulted in 4 enquiries from prospective foster carers.

The Foster for Plymouth website and social media platforms were upgraded ahead of the film launch to ensure we had the correct foundation for the videos to launch and for prospective foster carers to land on an up to date, professional website.

We invite you to watch and share the film “Everything”:

<https://fosterforplymouth.co.uk/you-can-change-everything-for-a-local-child/>

HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT THE RECRUITMENT OF FOSTER CARERS

Fostering may be something you have considered for yourselves but if not, you can still offer much needed support. We are asking that everyone talk to their friends, their family, colleagues and networks about the rewards of Fostering for Plymouth. Words are powerful, they create a ripple effect and this has a positive impact on our children and young people.

In talking about fostering, you are not only encouraging people to think about fostering but also encouraging partners and businesses to think of other ways that they can show their support to the fostering community and to care experienced children and young people. Maybe they can offer sponsorship for a special event, offer discounts or free tickets, provide free room hire for training or food for a celebratory event. They can share the word in their workplaces and may also think differently about how they support their employees who are or may want to be foster carers or kinship carers by becoming a Fostering Friendly or Kinship Friendly Employer. They may be able to offer mentoring, work experience, apprenticeships or employment to care experienced young people.

You will see our Check it out, then pass it on! Cards in front of you, along with some of our promotional materials. We ask that you please take this with you today and share within your networks. The cards are a really simple idea – you scan the QR code which will take you to the website and you can find out about fostering for Plymouth City Council. You then pass the card on and your contact does the same, before they pass it on. Together we can make a real difference for children and young people in Plymouth.