

## Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel



Date of meeting:	06 February 2025
Title of Report:	Family Homes for Plymouth Children
Lead Member:	Councillor Jemima Laing (Deputy Leader, and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications)
Lead Strategic Director:	David Haley (Director for Childrens Services)
Author:	Vivien Lines
Contact Email:	Vivien.lines@plymouth.gov.uk
Your Reference:	<a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a>
Key Decision:	No
Confidentiality:	Part I - Official

### **Purpose of Report**

This report provides a progress report on the Family Homes for Plymouth Children Programme which has been established to transform our practices with children who are at risk of coming into care and to improve practice, placement sufficiency and outcomes for children and young people in care to ensure more children in care are looked after in family homes close to Plymouth.

### **Recommendations and Reasons**

- I. It is recommended that the programme is noted.

### **Alternative options considered and rejected**

- I. None

### **Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan**

Keeping children and adults in Plymouth safe.

### **Implications for the Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:**

Placement costs currently create a significant financial pressure for the Council.

### **Financial Risks**

Placement costs currently create a significant financial pressure for the Council.

### **Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:**

None

**Other Implications: e.g. Health and Safety, Risk Management, Child Poverty:**

\* When considering these proposals members have a responsibility to ensure they give due regard to the Council's duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination and promote good relations between people who share protected characteristics under the Equalities Act and those who do not.

The programme is designed to keep children safe in family settings, or other settings when this is required, close to Plymouth.

**Appendices**

\*Add rows as required to box below

Ref.	Title of Appendix	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable)						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
		If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.						
A	Briefing report title							

**Background papers:**

\*Add rows as required to box below

Please list all unpublished, background papers relevant to the decision in the table below. Background papers are unpublished works, relied on to a material extent in preparing the report, which disclose facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the work is based.

Title of any background paper(s)	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable)						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.							

**Sign off:**

Fin	Click here to enter text.	Leg	Click here to enter text.	Mon Off	Click here to enter text.	HR	Click here to enter text.	Assets	Click here to enter text.	Strat Proc	Click here to enter text.
Originating Senior Leadership Team member: David Haley											

Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes

Date agreed: 27/09/2024

Cabinet Member approval: Cllr Laing approved via email

Date approved: 24/01/2025

## **1. Introduction**

A growth in demand for children's social care support and children entering care has been seen as a result of experiences of childhood neglect, trauma and disrupted attachments that have often gone unmet for some time. Children with these experiences also often have additional learning needs that may have been unidentified and unmet for some time making their emotional and behavioural needs more complex.

We are committed to placing children in care in settings that are as close as possible to their home area to enable them to maintain family and friendship relationships (where positive), access their social worker and local health and therapeutic services and maintain their school placements to support good outcomes including a supported and local transition to independence. Children and young people in care should grow up in a family setting with foster carers so that they can experience secure attachments and healthy development. Exceptionally, residential children's homes can be appropriate to enable a young person to make progress with their emotional and behavioural needs in order to achieve a planned move back into a family setting.

We are increasing the number of children placed with our own foster carers, but a lack of in-house fostering growth has led to a higher proportion of Plymouth children being looked after with Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) carers. A lack of fostering growth overall has led to an overuse of residential care and a small number of children experiencing unregulated settings.

There are two dynamics in the system. Firstly, we need to ensure that the right children are in care by ensuring effective support is provided to families when problems emerge to enable children to remain within their families and where children cannot be safely cared for at home ensure that all alternative arrangements within their extended family and friends network are explored. Secondly, when children cannot remain safely within their family and friends' network, we need to be able to provide a care placement which enables the needs identified in the child's care plan to be well met which for the majority is to be in a family home. Failure to place a child in the right placement often results in the child failing to make good progress, placement breakdown and/or manifestations of distress in the child.

This is both a cost and volume pressure. PCC has become reliant on the independent sector for a significant volume of fostering and residential provision. At the same time, the independent sector has demonstrated that it is not able to provide sufficient high-quality and value for money placements to meet the needs of our young people. These dynamics are resulting in children living in placements that are not what is set out in their care plan, and in particular children who should be with foster carers living in children's homes and is creating a significant financial pressure for the Council.

In response to these dynamics a programme of transformation and improvement work is in place, our Family Homes for Plymouth Children Programme, to ensure the right children are in our care and to ensure that when children do need to be in care they are in placements that meet their needs, and most children are in family settings close to Plymouth. this paper provides an update on the programme. The Family Homes programme is closely aligned to our wider children's social care improvement work, which is focused on ensuring all children benefit from high quality assessment, planning and interventions to improve outcomes.

## **2. Levels of need and financial information**

The number of children in care peaked at 530 in May 2024 and has reduced steadily to 521 at the end of December. The approved budget for placements for children in care in 2024/25 is £40.087m and at period 9 (December) the annual forecast spend is £45.937m, representing a forecast overspend of £5.850m. This has been a deteriorating position month on month this financial year as the number of children in care placed in residential settings has been increasing due to a shortage of foster placements for children.

As a result of planned practice improvements, we have achieved an increase in the number of children placed with connected carers and an increase in the number of children placed with our Foster for Plymouth carers. However, as a result of a national shortage of foster carers there has been an increase in the number of children placed in children's homes from 50 in September 2023 when budget setting

was undertaken, to 64 at the end of December. Whilst we have a successful block contract with a local provider, providing homes in Plymouth for 16 children, 44 children in care are in children's homes at a distance from Plymouth. In addition, the average weekly cost of a child in a residential placement has risen to £7,523 per week from £6,906 per week in September 2023.

In addition, because of the overall shortage of fostering and residential placements, a small number of children have experienced very high-cost illegal arrangements, being placed by Plymouth in arrangements that are not registered with Ofsted. Although we have only two children placed in unregistered arrangements, and they are in suitable provision but which is registered with CQC not Ofsted, at times there have been up to 9 Plymouth children in such arrangements creating a significant financial pressure for the Council, forecast to be almost £6m in 2024-25.

The table below shows the change in numbers of children in care in different types of placements since budget setting was completed.

Type of Placement	Estimated Numbers Sept 23	Existing Budget £m	Month 8 Forecast £m	Actual Numbers Month 9	Month 9 Forecast £m	Variance to Month 8 £m	Variance to Budget £m
External Residential	50	15.248	18.650	64	19.034	0.384	3.786
Unregistered	6	3.387	6.043	4	5.933	-0.110	2.546
External Fostering	158	9.251	8.880	154	8.88	0.000	-0.371
In-House Foster Care	126	2.855	2.855	150	2.855	0.000	0.000
In-House Connected Carers	42	0.952	0.952	49	0.952	0.000	0.000
External Supported Living	41	3.758	3.600	46	3.648	0.048	-0.110
Other Placement Settings - Children in Care	65	1.274	1.274	55	1.274	0.000	0.000
<b>TOTAL CHILDREN IN CARE</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>36.725</b>	<b>42.255</b>	<b>522</b>	<b>42.575</b>	<b>0.321</b>	<b>5.850</b>

### 3. The Family Homes for Plymouth Children Programme

Our programme of work to ensure children in care have a home that meets their needs and that wherever possible children grow up in families local to Plymouth is called 'Family Homes for Plymouth Children.' It has several elements:

## Family Homes for Plymouth Children



High Expectations, High Support, High Challenge

### 6. Improved support to Special Guardians and kinship carers.

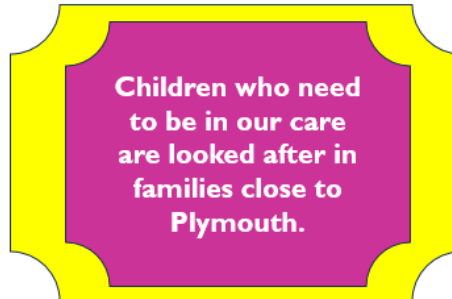
**Objective:** more children leave care to well supported Special Guardianship arrangements.

### 1. Market development close to Plymouth – tactically grow the independent sector residential and fostering markets.

**Objective:** Publish and implement our updated Sufficiency Strategy and target growth across residential and fostering providers. Strengthen our Brokerage function to improve access to quality placements.

### 5. PCC to become a provider of residential care.

**Objective:** improve placement choice ensuring all children are looked after in a high-quality setting which meets their needs close to Plymouth wherever possible.



### 2. STEP children from residential care into family placements

**Objective:** Reduce unplanned admissions. Evidence based approaches to support children to STEP from residential to family care at the right time.

### 4. A clear and confident approach to reunification to identify and support children to return home from care safely.

**Objective:** develop and implement a focused approach to ensure children are supported to return home to their families care when this is safe or them

### 3. Foster for Plymouth growth and development of offer in line with priorities in our Sufficiency Strategy.

**Objective:** develop the intensive and specialist offer and implement an improved offer for foster carers, including through the Mockingbird model, to increase and achieve a net-gain of Foster for Plymouth Foster Carers, provide children with the right home when they first come into care.

In summary, key planned outcomes of the work include;

- Improving practice to keep more children at home and utilising family options when children do need alternative care, including further developing the use of family led decision making models to build family capacity so that children can remain cared for within their friends and family network.
- Growing the local independent sector market to increase local supply of both residential and foster care in line with our Sufficiency Strategy.
- Strengthening our brokerage function so we maximise our capacity to identify the right placement at the right price for all children from when they first come into care.
- Using an evidence-based approach to identify children ready to move on from residential settings and to 'STEP' children from residential settings to foster placements in a timely, managed and well supported way.
- Recruiting more foster carers for our in-house fostering service, 'Foster for Plymouth' and supporting more of our carers to be able to look after children with more complex needs or challenging behaviours.
- Supporting children who have been in care for some time to be reunified with their birth families when it is identified that there have been significant changes in the family.
- PCC considering becoming a direct provider of residential care for children and young people.
- Ensuring we are getting value for money from our placement spend, including maximising contributions from partners for eligible children with more complex needs.
- Improving support for kinship and Special Guardianship carers so that more children can leave care successfully through these routes.

### 3.1 Market development

To improve the range of high-quality residential placements and foster care closer to Plymouth we have:

- Strengthened how we work with fostering and residential providers in the region and elsewhere, in line with the objectives set out in our Sufficiency Strategy to support them to develop more provision in Plymouth.

- Improved our brokerage capacity so that we maximise available placements local to Plymouth for our looked after children.

Our Sufficiency Strategy has been updated for publication to the market setting out an updated needs analysis of the children we need care for and specific priorities where we would encourage the independent sector to develop more local provision. This currently includes provision for children with more complex emotional and behavioural needs and provision for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. A dedicated Commissioning Lead has identified tactical opportunities for local providers to develop more provision in line with local need and is working with specific providers to ensure more high-quality provision is in place.

The capacity in the children's Brokerage Team has been increased to improve our ability to utilise intelligence about providers to source the right placement for children from when they first come into care. The team have a programme of work in place to fully utilise existing frameworks of preferred providers as well as to identify specific provision in line with specific children's needs, such as our children who have plans to STEP them down from residential care.

### **3.2 Foster for Plymouth Growth**

So that more of our children in care can live with our foster carers close to Plymouth, we have:

- Introduced an improved offer for our foster carers based on what our foster carers told us at the 2024 Foster Carer Summit. The improved offer covers both enhanced financial and practical support alongside practice improvement work for our workforce which foster carers will be part of delivering. This has included foster carers not being exempt from Council Tax.
- Ramped up our marketing and recruitment work to attract new carers, including being part of the South West Regional Hub and having an increased presence with community groups, faith groups, businesses and partners (currently including Dartmoor Zoo) and across Plymouth to widen the understanding of fostering and encourage applications to foster from diverse experiences and communities.
- Improved our support to carers to enable them to care for children with more complex needs, including those stepping out of residential, through introducing a 'Mockingbird' model of support, emergency foster care model and a model for the bespoke package of support for young people stepping out of residential.
- Held an annual Foster Carer Summit to uphold our commitment to review the support and retention offer regularly with our foster carers. The next one is being held in early February.

Our Foster Carer Ambassadors fed back that the new Support and Retention Offer to Our Foster Carers 2024/2025 is a fair and comprehensive offer and shows exemplary intentions. They feel that this will ensure that support is implemented and enable them to hold the Local Authority and partners to account if this is not achieved. They have also shared that through this process and in the implementation of the new financial offer as well as the support and retention offer, they have felt listened to, heard and respected. They have seen senior leaders and elected members take notice of their expert knowledge and make meaningful change as a result, for which they have expressed their thanks.

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 28th April 2024 after a period of collaborative design and implementation, with the formal launch event taking place on 5th 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.

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 now in post, the Hub Home Carers have been recruited and trained allowing the constellation to be launched on Friday 1st November 2024 with a celebratory event with Foster Carers, Children and Young People kindly hosted by Hellermann Tyton. Plans are in place to implement two further Mockingbirds during 2025-26.

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. We know 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 four 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.

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.

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 17th 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 18th 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.

### **3.3 STEPping children from residential care to family settings**

So that we realise our commitment to children growing up in families, we are:

- Challenging practitioners to be more ambitious for children in care to grow up in a family utilising an evidence-based tool (which evaluates children's needs by understanding behaviour, emotional wellbeing, risk to self and others, relationships and Indicators of psychiatric or neurodevelopmental conditions) to inform our assessments and identify children and young people who are ready to step out of residential care into family settings and to ensure that this happens a timely way.
- Ensuring our care planning for children supports children to be cared for in a family home.
- For our older young people who are in residential children's homes, this includes consideration of moving into supported accommodation to prepare for independence or focus on a transition to adult services.
- Meeting weekly as a management team, alongside the weekly Children's Resource Panels, to review progress of identified STEPs children and young people, review any children or young people who have recently moved into residential and review the circumstances of those previously not deemed ready to step out so as to ensure that the searches for family based care happens without delay.

As a result of challenges in the sufficiency of family homes over recent years, we have not been as ambitious for children in care to be in family homes as we should be. The STEPS approach is challenging this including using an evidence-based approach to assess children in residential care and identify those who may be suitable for family homes. The approach includes writing updated profiles and pen pictures which focus on the child's strengths, needs and the desired outcomes. These are used to engage with Foster for Plymouth and IFAs on our peninsula framework and the wider IFA market nationally, where this is appropriate for the child's care plan, to identify Foster Carers committed to a planned transition for the child out of residential. The Placement Request Forms are launched to our framework IFAs for children who can live in the South West region and the Brokerage Team are holding programme of conversations with off framework IFAs, including for children where we are searching for a family outside of the south west.

Despite our ambition for children to be in family homes and active searching for foster carers for around 20 children in residential settings this year, limited placement sufficiency both in the independent and in house fostering sectors has significantly impacted our ability to progress plans and achieve the target dates and associated savings anticipated. Over the past two years there has been a reduction of

approximately 2000 foster carers nationally, partly as a result of the impact of the pandemic on family's capacity to free up a bedroom for fostering.

At the current time, there has been a greater level of success in progression of STEPs plans into in house fostering than IFAs and for some of our older young people, greater benefits have been realised from progressing step forward to supported accommodation. One child in the STEPs programme was successfully placed with foster carers this month and four children and young people have an identified in house fostering match which is being progressed, one child is expected to move by the end of January 2025, two siblings are expected to move by the end of March 2025 and the other child has a longer term plan due to the need to undertake sibling assessments and transitions, however there is a clear plan in place.

In addition to the five children and young people above, there are fourteen children and young people currently placed in residential children's homes who are being actively worked through the STEPs programme or for whom step forward planning was already in place to move from those settings to family home so a more suitable provision. Searches are active for all of these children and young people, however there are no current expressions of interest or placement offers for them. A further thirteen children and young people have been identified by the teams as being suitable to step out of residential in the next six months, these children and young people have all been booked in to Children's Resource Panel over the next three weeks to formalise the plan and timeframes for actions to achieve this.

Creative ways are being pursued to support the children and young people who have been identified for STEPS to refamiliarize themselves and build trust in living with a fostering family as well as supporting Foster Carers to think differently about their capacity to offer a child a home from residential. This includes one of the young people being included in the Mockingbird Constellation and those where a local family is being explored being invited to Foster for Plymouth Social Committee events.

### **3.4 Reunifying children with their birth families and wider networks**

Reunification is when a child returns home from a period of being in care and is the most common way for children to leave care in England. Children in care should always be supported to maintain connections with their family networks as these are often their lifelong links. Many children may experience a short episode of care and return to their families once it is assessed as safe for them to do so. However, reunification refers to when children have had a long-term care plan, but where there are changes in the child and/or family's circumstances which enables a safe return home to be considered. To ensure we identify opportunities for children to return to their birth families when they have been in our care for some time and this can be achieved safely, we are:

- Supporting children to maintain lifelong links with their birth families.
- Making sure that we continuously review changes in children's circumstances that may make reunification possible.
- Refocusing our Targeted Help offer to provide intensive assessment and support to enable more children to return home from care to their birth families.

The Edge of Care Team have developed a model of practice which supports children to return home from care in a planned and supported way when it is safe for them to do so is part of our Family Homes for Plymouth Children programme. This model sets out a practice framework based on good practice toolkits, which addresses these challenges. The framework is a resource to support practice improvements for children returning home from care and to support practitioners and managers with professional judgement to complex decisions about whether a child should return home from care and what support will be needed to ensure that reunification is safe and successful. It provides a structure for analysing risks to the child based on robust evidence. It supports families and workers to understand what needs to change, to set goals, access support and services and review progress. It builds on and complements the existing work that practitioners are already doing with these children and their families, rather than replacing it.

Children in care who may be suitable for planned work to consider a reunification plan are currently being identified and dedicated resource to support the detailed assessment and careful planning and support to families that is needed to ensure reunification is done safely and successfully is being agreed.

### **3.5 PCC becoming a provider of residential care**

To increase the quality and availability of residential care for children local to Plymouth, Plymouth City Council is becoming a provider of residential care across a number of types of provision including short breaks for disabled children, short term intervention to return young people back home or support them into independence and longer-term residential children's homes for children with complex needs.

Positives of developing local in house residential children's homes includes;

- Ability to support children with local education and health services.
- Improved potential to achieve step down to fostering and reunification to families when children are in Plymouth.
- Reducing the average length of time children spend in residential.
- Improved experiences from children experiencing fewer moves.
- Improved family time for children to maintain links and relationships with their families where possible.
- Better quality assurance, scrutiny and consistency of care when delivered in-house and close to Plymouth.
- Potential savings from preventing a child moving into an unregulated arrangement which can cost us £12,000 a week.
- Savings from social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers not having to visit children at a distance from Plymouth. £100k additional expenditure has been allocated to Social Worker travel costs in recent years as a result of increased numbers of children being placed at a distance from Plymouth.

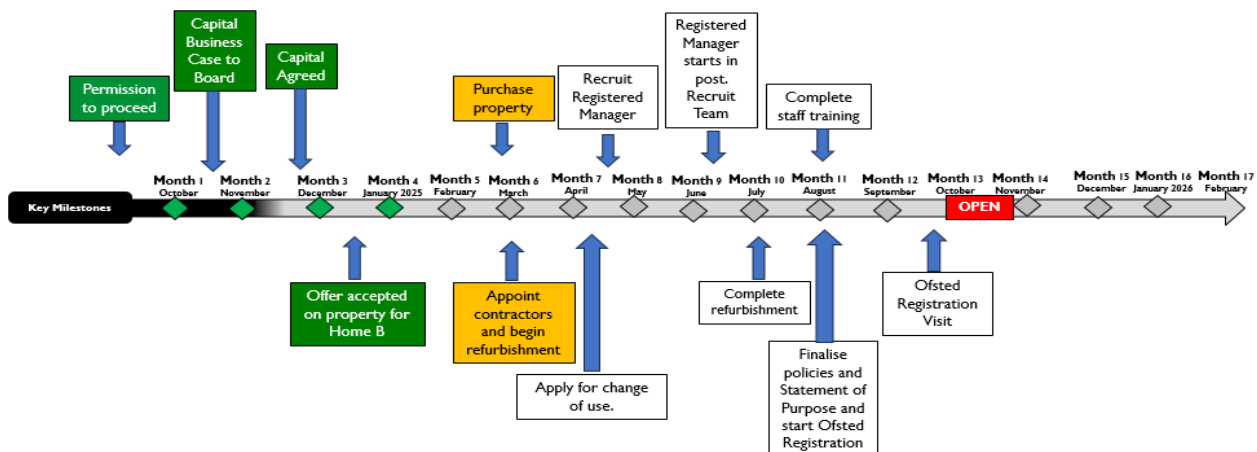
Capital has been agreed to purchase two houses in Plymouth and to develop them as the first homes for six children (three in each) between 8 and 16 years old. The children's homes are being developed to resemble family life as far as possible. An offer has been accepted on one property just before Christmas, and work is progressing to ensure the location is suitable and with a view to the home being refurbished and registered with Ofsted prior to opening towards the end of the year. Viewings are currently taking place for the second property. A key risk will be recruiting the managers and staff team with the required skills and experience and work is starting early with HR-OD colleagues to plan and deliver an effective recruitment campaign.

Capital has also been allocated to undertake a feasibility study of the suitability of an existing PCC building, Colwill Lodge, as a residential short breaks provision for children with disabilities which will be designed to support families and prevent children from needing to come into high cost residential provision. The feasibility study is due to be completed by the end of February to support a detailed business case to be considered for the capital investment that will be needed to refurbish the building.

Finally, we are currently working with ICB colleagues to consider a joint bid to the DfE for an allocation from a current capital scheme to support residential developments for children with complex emotional and behavioural needs who are at risk of placements requiring a deprivation of liberty.

Opening children's homes is a complex process and as well as the recruitment of staff, the requirement to register with Ofsted is identified as a risk to timescales as delays in Ofsted's response are being experienced nationally.

## Residential Children's Homes Indicative Timeline



### 3.6 Support to special guardianship and kinship carers

The objective of this strand of work is to support more children to be with kinship carers, family or friends who step in to care for a child when their parent isn't able to, rather than the child coming into care. In addition, we are developing practice to enable more children in care to leave care through a Special Guardianship route.

To prevent children from being in care unnecessarily, there is a need to improve the identification of and support to kinship carers and Special Guardianship carers, this includes ensuring financial support is equitable to foster carers so that kinship carers are well supported when a child would otherwise have come into care and carers do not lose out when their child leaves care through a Special Guardianship arrangement.

During 2024-25 a new Special Guardianship and Kinship Carer Support Team was implemented and has been identifying best practice in this area, as well as putting in place a stronger support offer to carers, including confirming contributions from key partners such as Health and the Virtual School. We have been identifying kinship carers across Plymouth who were previously unknown to us and developing peer support networks with two already in place within Family Hubs. In addition, a Special Guardianship Support Plan approach has been developed ready for implementation with all cares to set out the support plan for a child before the order is made.

A Special Guardianship Policy has been agreed and is being implemented ensuring Special Guardians are well supported to meet children's needs, and a policy setting out the financial support that will be provided is being finalised for implementation early in 2025-26.

Other priorities for the team this year include;

- Further strengthening partners understanding of and offer of support to kinship carers and special guardians.
- Introducing mandatory SGO workshops for all carers being assessed in care proceedings so they can make informed choices.
- Ensuring all children benefit from high quality life story work which enables them to understand their life story.
- Implementing a structured approach to support planning for carers and strengthening support plans.
- Improving support to Special Guardians with children's family time with their birth families.

- Implement support arrangements for specific groups of carers, including through Pause (birth mothers), Adopt South West (developing a youth group) and support for birth children of Special Guardianship carers.
- Strengthening the short breaks offer for carers.
- Extending the Mockingbird model to include identified Special Guardianship carers in line with their support plan.
- Provide consultation and advice to carers considering Special Guardianship
- Developing more support networks for kinship and Special Guardianship carers.
- Develop a regular newsletter and reference group for carers.

#### **4. Planned Programme outcomes**

The planned outcomes of the programme are;

- Fewer children will be in care.
- When children do need to be in care, more children will be looked after by kinship or connected carers and more children will leave care to Special Guardians.
- More children will be looked after in foster care close to Plymouth, and a higher proportion of children in foster care will be in placements provided by our in house fostering service Foster for Plymouth.
- Fewer children will be looked after in residential settings and when they do need to be this will be time limited to achieve specific outcomes which will support a child to move into a family setting.
- Children will be provided with the right setting to meet their need from when they first come into care leading to improved placement stability.
- Children in care will be looked after close to Plymouth.
- The average cost of care will reduce.

#### **5. Case studies;**

**R's Journey;** R is a 10 year old girl who was placed in a residential children's home in May 2021. As a suitable foster family was not identified for R, she was moved back to Plymouth into one of the local residential children's homes to allow us to search locally for a family home for her. Following engagement discussions with IFAs on our peninsula framework, the brokerage team received an offer from experienced IFA Foster Carers and this was deemed by R's Social Worker to be a very good match. R is now in a period of transitions, at her first meeting with her new Foster Carers she said "*Darren has done good, he's found me a good one*". Due to a family commitment, R will move at the beginning of January 2025 but she will be having her own Christmas with them before Christmas too.

**B's Journey;** B is a 12 year old boy who was placed out of city in a residential children's home in November 2023 when his long term foster placement disrupted and no fostering home was identified for him. Through the STEPS work, experienced Foster for Plymouth Foster Carers have been identified and they are keen to offer B a long term home. B does not want to move unless he can move back to Plymouth as he has strong family connections here. The identified Foster Carers are close to Plymouth and will be able to support his family relationships as well as maintaining the relationship with his former foster carers who still look after his brother. B's Social Worker took the Foster Carers to visit B this week and this went really well and the plan now is that he will visit their home when he comes to Plymouth for family time. If this progresses well, B will move by the end of January 2025. We are working closely with the Virtual School to ensure his education is not disrupted.