# Fostering regional group – meeting notes and action log April 2023

Chair: Sarah Daly DCS Portsmouth

Attendees: Kerry Bailey (Portsmouth), Clark McAuley (Surrey), Jackie Giles (Oxfordshire), John Donnelly (Brighton and Hove), Maria Cordrey (Kent), Mark Vening (Kent), Peter Hodges (Bracknell Forest), Selena Makepeace (Bucks), Sharon Godfrey (Milton Keynes), Keith Langley (West Berks), Fiona Lewis (East Sussex), Grace Amps (Brighter Futures for Children- Reading), Yemi Ukwenu (Slough), Sarah Duerden (Oxfordshire), Mathew George (Slough), Gemma Pavey (Brighton and Hove), Natalie Bujega (Achieving for Children), Jackie Clark (Portsmouth), Berni Farmer (Isle of Wight), Sarah Smith (Hampshire)

**Meeting details:** Monday 24 April 10-11.30

**Item 1 and 2:** Introductions, meeting notes agreed and action log agreed

**Item 3: Care Review: Regional Care cooperatives, impacts of greater entitlements re: Staying put**

SD introduced an open discussion items and invited LAs to share any thinking they had around Regional Care Cooperatives, if any LAs had started to map the possible impacts on foster carer numbers of government’s proposals around staying put, and if there were any other thoughts/responses to the Government’s response to the McAlister report (stable homes built on love).

SG said for Milton Keynes sufficiency is a major challenge even though LAC pop is fairly stable we are playing catch up. And on the care cooperative I don’t know how successful it will be. It might be like the RAAs where we come together and we have to come up with a plan. SG said at this point in time it feels too much of grey areas without specifics.

SD (Oxfordshire) said it is difficult to know what the practical next steps are. If we are doing recruitment as clusters or a region, how will that national recruitment support? A lot of us recognise that challenge in MK about an aging group and reframing fostering as a profession. Many LAs run fostering in a very different way, if this is about an RAA model then you could face losing your carers to a neighbouring authority. The big thing the carers are talking about are the finances – the 12.5% increase and we are now overspent and need to explain that to members. I’ve not seen anything from government about cash to offset the increases costs.

SD (Oxfordshire), thought SGs comment on the regional approach are interesting. We have Mockingbird we have a good offer, but the area we live in is expensive and so it makes it difficult to recruit.

JG (Oxfordshire) refleted that they are giving people the opportunity to respond as teams and individuals to the Government’s response to McAllister.

SD saying casting back to RAAs the issue of fear around sharing is significant, so really the focus needs to be on recruitment. We have a lot of thinking to do.

JD (Brighton and Hove) shared his concern is that the whole thing is based on a myth that there are 1000s of carers out there and we just aren’t reaching them. We are all making extensive efforts right now, but the carers aren’t there. It is built on a myth. We can think again, but the backdrop is challenging. More carers leaving that coming in. In Brighton there is a massive housing crisis because people don’t have a spare room that can afford to foster. We are all experiencing the pandemic, you now have an opportunity to work at home through any job, whereas that was USP for fostering before. Even a regional approach which may have its benefits but I’m just not convinced and I think they are being unrealistic.

CM (Surrey) asked for others to share with the possible extension of Staying put to 23, if some LA's pay full fostering allowances to their staying put carers or the staying put allowances CM reflected in Surrey that they do not and concluded this would be an area where it would be difficult to achieve harmonisation in a regional approach.

GM said the fostering market is much more competitive than the adoption where regionalisation has worked before.

JC said foster carers are raising issues about fostering charges, but they are also concerned about support. We talk about a wealth of support, but we don’t make it clear to the carers what that support means.

**Item 4: Trends in fostering recruitment**

SD introduced the item and reflected that it felt very connected with the previous discussion on Stable Homes built on love. SD reflected on JC’s comment that the RAAs have been successful with clarifying and streamlining the support offer to adoptive families. SD asked LAs to share successes in fostering recruitment as well as trends they were observing.

GM shared in Slough there is a child complexity assessment and the payment is based on complexity of the child’s needs and this payment differential helps with both recruitment and retention.

SD thought there was more that could be done to forge relationships between foster carers and the child’s social worker, and that this was a key differentiator we had as the LA. RE agreed that this was something that came up in our research with foster carers about why they choose to foster for an LA rather than an IFA. **Action:** RE to circulate previous research with foster carers.

JD said that sometimes the supervising social worker might not have capacity to build those relationships due to caseload, vacancies. Could I ask how many carers each Supervising Social Worker support?

**Action:** RE to benchmark caseloads for supervising social worker and numbers of carers/placements recruited in the last year.

MV noted, and others agreed that there are a lot of IFAs with more advanced recruitment practices.

MV asked if any LAs have offered exemption or significant reduction in local council tax for foster carers as a recruitment tool/incentive? JG has looked at it in Oxfordshire but to get districts to agree is hard, this is perhaps an easier option in unitary councils. SM asked how much work happened – was it sounding out or a robust business case around the costs to subsidise council tax vs. the costs saved by placing in house. JG said in Oxfordshire foster carers are writing directly to councillors. However, the offer to care leavers is where we are trying to focus the corporate parenting responsibilities for both county and district.

SS agreed with the Oxfordshire analysis. Nationally if government could say we will exempt or reduce them that would be extremely helpful, rather than running national campaigns that have minimal mipact. In Hampshire we work with too many district councils and all offer something different.

FL agreed that in East Sussex district and borough negotiations were also complex. CM agreed this was also the case in Surrey. We are having the same problem with district and boroughs and one of the "solutions" being offered is that we pay the costs of council tax to foster carers directly from children's services budget rather than carers not being exempt.

PH from Bracknell Forest said we don’t have the gap in organisations as we are the smallest unitary, but we haven’t had traction either. We all have information on how much it costs to recruit and keep a carer, we have secured a £1000 retention payment provide they are a carer.

Wokingham have got foster carers exempt from council tax but we have struggled.

SG reflected that successes have been around word of mouth and reinvestment in the website. We also do events and go out into the community and a foster friendly policy. We’ve introduced a finder’s fee type of approach.

In Oxfordshire there has been real success. The highest recruitment activity since 2018 – 43 new carers; however, 26 that are available for short or long term. People prefer respite, where they aren’t making FT commitment. Deregistrations have plateud at about 10 a year for ST and LT carers.

SD asked what about housing application status as in potential foster carers getting priority banding ? PH said on Bracknell our housing allocations policy is being updated to look at this issue

SD shared that like in BF there is an incentive payment, but it is £1500 in Oxfordshire, rather than £1000 in Bracknell Forest

We’ve seen an increase in enquiries but people keen to be assessed for respite care as a start. Word of Mouth is working well for foster carers, mockingbird carers. We offer £500 introduction/finders fee when they have a child placed.

SM asked if there is there any tie in to get the bonus payments - PH said in Bracknell Forest it is based on previous 12 months rather than the future. PH said the more complex bit is when you have to pro-rata it, Respite tends to get half.

SM said in Bucks there was an overwhelming response to Ukranian families, but that didn’t have an impact on fostering recruitment. We were so overwhelmed with the response, what was it about that was different? It is a family support, it isn’t about supporting a child on their own.

I spoke with the service for Ukraine Host families about whether some of them may consider fostering and they replied ..they have all signed up to the scheme to host an individual or a small family, and those hosting parents with children do not have any caring responsibilities for the child, the Ukrainian parent is solely responsible for the child/ren so is a very different role to a foster carer but some of the hosts are just naturally very welcoming and very good with people so you could see them in a foster carer role. The checks completed on them to become a host are also a lot less then for them to become a foster carer

Oxfordshire have recruitment and retention team, and a panel to allow us to gather insight with around 5 foster carers. SW to act as conduit between carers and foster carers to influence our approach to marketing. Have a foster carers forum to promote it next month.

**Action:** Oxfordshire to share recruitment retention team approach and impact it has had at future meeting

**Item 5: DBS checks, should fostering be a stand alone category:**

Louise Smith attended from the LGA to seek feedback from the group. At the LGA they had a query re: DBS checks and the new-ish [DBS filtering regime](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-filtering-guidance/dbs-filtering-guide) from TACT. TACT flagged to the LGA that the new approach means that certain offences no longer show automatically on a DBS check, including those over 11 years old that attracted a non-custodial sentence and multiple convictions for the same offence. Local police forces can opt to put offences back on the forms but clearly that introduces an element of local variation.

TACT has raised concerns to the LGA that any fostering agency (LA or IFA) needs to have a full conviction history to be able to approve or otherwise a foster carer. They have examples of e.g. multiple drink driving offences disclosed by applicants but not appearing on the DBS, and an affray/assault that was disclosed but not on the DBS.

The LGA wanted to know whether the South East fostering group would support the LGA to push the HO to classify fostering as a standalone role so that this information will be available to IFAs and LAs.

LAs responded that they would support this lobbying to the Home Office.

Some LAs responded that they also do Police national computer(PNC) checks to mitigate this risk; however LAs noted that police have different policies about whether they allow/facilitate PNC checks.

MV noted that there is another element which also needs to be picked up, that there is an adults list and children’s list. For example, there could be a prior conviction relating to safeguarding an adult but that would not show when the LA searches re: children’s safeguarding.

Colleagues also reflected it is difficult to get DBS checks for adults with significant contact who are not the foster carer (e.g. a new boyfriend of the foster carer, or friends/partners of adult birth children).

**Action:** RE to contact Louise toward the end of the year to see if any feedback from Home Office re: DBS classification.

**Item 6: Connected carers: Are LAs observing a trend of connected carers choosing to foster for IFAs over LA? Do any LAs have policies and processes to share around overseas connected carers?**

NB recently had a case with a connected carer choosing to foster for an IFA. Some IFAs are mentioning that you can do connected care. I was wondering of the issues of IFAs doing more of this work. We are seeing a lot more connected assessments for people overseas, we have done that under SG, but this feels new. PH shared that Bracknell Forest have done connected carers aboard largely through armed forces – we used SAFA, had connected carer in Nova Scotia so did work virtually and commissioned Canada to do that.

In Bracknell we had a similar one, where someone was already registered with an IFA, I’ve not heard of anyone purposefully recruiting in case of abuse/neglect in family. We struggle with quality of overseas, a lot of ISW assessments we often don’t agree with them they lack engaging with internal processes (panel, court) and they can lack depth. It would be ideal to have assessments done in a different way, courts seem to buy into them, and that it is robust but I feel they lack depth and they can be over optimistic. Connection is so tenuous, no blood relation, and it can delay the whole process.

**Action:** Future item for January – how to increase quality of ISW assessments

**Item 7: Update on planned approach to mystery shopping** RE updated the group that up to 5 foster carers from across the region to be recruited to undertake this work. They will be paid £25 to mystery shop a website (there will be 19 LA websites and 6 well used IFAs in the region). In total this will cost £925. Each participating foster carer will also be paid £50 to attend one briefing meeting before the summer break, and one meeting in early October to discuss the findings (any members of the fostering group are welcome to attend this meeting if they are interested). The foster carers will have from the briefing meeting to the end of September to do the work and they will need to fill in a form for each LA or IFA the mystery shop. We will use the same form as previously as a starter for ten, although will gather some feedback from foster carers at the briefing meeting to see what they would like to change/look at to make sure it covers the things they think are important.

This work will be funded by SESLIP. The following LAs have confirmed they have carers that can undertake this task:

* Jackie Clark (Portsmouth)
* Keith Langley (West Berks)
* Sarah Smith (Hampshire)
* Cathy Seiderer (Brighton and Hove)

**Item 8 Mockingbird update**

**Previously launched not as part of this funding round:**

* Oxfordshire- Jackie.Giles@oxfordshire.gov.uk
* Slough – Yemi.Ukwenu@slough.gov.uk
* Surrey- gianna.forward@surreycc.gov.uk
* Portsmouth  - vicky.laybourne@portsmouthcc.gov.uk

**Recently launched**

* Bucks (Oct 2022) – hilary.shayegan@buckinghamshire.gov.uk
* West Sussex (Oct 2022) Nicola Sankey Nicola.Sankey@westsussex.gov.uk

**Under development/in implementation to be launched**

* RBWM -Harkiran Randhawa Natalie – natalie.bugeja@achievingforchildren.org.uk harkiran.randhawa@achievingforchildren.org.uk
* Wokingham Karen Kuene and Hayley Rees – hayley.rees@wokingham.gov.uk
* Bracknell Forest- Sam.Howard@bracknell-forest.gov.uk Peter.Hodges@bracknell-forest.gov.uk

**Just starting**

* Southampton – Carly Arnold (starts in May) and Matt Jenkins

**Possibly interested**

* Brighton and Hove – Cathy Seiderer

**Standing items: AOB:** future item on quality of ISW assessments.

CM asked about Ofsted grading for unregistered provision and how we are supporting our supported lodgings to register as providers. CM noted this is being supported by commissioning team in surrey. There is a conference that providers are attendeing. [Supported Accommodation (ncb.org.uk)](https://www.ncb.org.uk/sector-awareness-provider-preparedness-supported-accommodation)

**Agreed focus for next meeting :** benchmarking and Surrey to share practice.

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**Action log:** This action log was updated 19 April 2023. Shaded lines, actions are complete

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|  | **Action** | **Responsible** | **Date issued** | **Status** |
| **32** | Future discussion – increasing quality of ISW assessments | RE | April 2023 | Open  |
| **31** | RE to contact Louise toward the end of the year to see if any feedback from Home Office re: DBS classification. | RE | April 2023 | Open |
| **30** | RE to benchmark caseloads for supervising social worker and numbers of carers/placements recruited in the last year. | RE | April 2023 | Complete |
| **29** | RE to circulate previous research with foster carers. | RE | April 2023 | Complete |
| **28** | RE to set up website mystery shopping run by foster carers for October 2023 | RE | Jan 2023 | Complete |
| **27** | JD to distribute contact details for trainer and amended foster care agreement. SS worker in Hampshire to connect with Brighton and Hove worker. – Anti-racist practice | JD | Jan 2023 | Complete |
| **26** | JG to share the training provider: anti-racist practice | JG | Jan 2023 | Complete |
| **25** | CS, JG and MG to share how to contact Ukraine hosts to see about receptiveness to foster. RE Add to agenda for future meeting.  | MG, JG, CS | Oct 2022 | Complete |
| **24** | RE to circulate previous research on USPs of LA fostering | RE | Oct 2022 | complete |
| **23** | MT to provide welcome book/pack examples for UASC to RE to circulate to the group | MT | Oct 2022 | complete |
| **22** | SD to check if Ofsted ok with return to virtual visits given increasing covid risks? | SD | Oct 2022 | Complete |
| **21** | LS to circulate CCTV policy from Bucks | LS | July 2022 | Complete |
| **20** | MV to circulate Kent slides | MV | July 2022 | Complete |
| **19** | KL (West Berks- circulated) and JC (Portsmouth) offered to share their recruitment crib sheet. | KL and JC | July 2022 | Complete |
| **18** | Bucks to do mystery shop for Jan (poss testing online/email contact), review mystery shopping in Jan | LS | July 2022 | Complete |
| **17** | Can we monitor and discuss Ukraine again next meeting | DG | April 2022 | Closed |
| **16** | Chair to escalate issues re: Inside Out | DG | April 2022 | Closed |
| **15** | West Sussex to share retention officer JD  | JB | April 2022 | closed |
| **14** | Kent to share practice next time | MV | April 2022 | Closed |
| **13** | Map management structures and roles, map respite/sleepover offer through survey | RE | April 2022 | Closed |
| **12** | Draft model of excellence for next time based on learning over the last several waves | RE | April 2022 | Closed |
| **11** | Next waves of mystery shopping are Bracknell Forest (July), then Milton Keynes (October) then Bucks (Jan) | RE | April 2022 | Closed |
| **10** | RE to contact IoW Milton Keynes and Surrey who have had no reps at the last two meetings | RE | Jan 2022 | Closed |
| **9** | Terms of reference to be finalised and uploaded to SESLIP website.  | RE | Jan 2022 | Closed |
| **8** | JB and MS to share contact details for training delivered on anti-racist practice | JB and MS | Jan 2022 | Closed |
| **7** | Discuss at April meeting which of the areas for regional collaboration the group want so take forward first (discuss with new chair) | All | Jan 2022 | Closed |
| **6** | LS to share legal advice received in relation to case where unions involved, re: foster carers and employment rights. | LS | Jan 2022 | Closed |
| **5** | Rebecca to draft Terms of reference and regional priorities for consideration at next meeting | RE | Oct 2021 | Closed |
| **4** | Any LAs interested in forming project team to develop regional recruitment website contact Rebecca. Revisit this action in 2023 pending outcome of Care review and capacity of Las to take forward. Being taken forward as part of DfE regional proposal | All | Oct 2021 | closed |
| **3** | Reading to share practice and mystery shopping at January meeting | SJ | Oct 2021 | Closed |
| **2** | All to contact Alistair Herbert to arrange support with using the fostering projection tool. Fostering projection tool to come back once further work complete. (Agenda for Jan 2023) | All | Oct 2021 | Closed |
| **1** | All to publicise regional online SG conference | All | Oct 2021 | Closed |