# Fostering regional group meeting notes and action log March 2025

**Date:**  12 March 2025

**Chair:** Sarah Daly DCS Portsmouth

**Attendees:** Alison Miller (Milton Keynes), Carly Arnold (Southampton), Catherine Seiderer (Brighton and Hove), Clark Mcauley (Surrey), Jackie Clark (Portsmouth), Dave Crewe (Portsmouth), Holli Blackburn (Wokingham), Sam Horton (Hants), Jo Conlon (Slough), John Donnelly (Brighton and Hove), Meena Kumar (Medway), Lorna Peterson (Bucks), Maria Cordrey (Kent), Mark Vening (Kent), Maryke McCarthy (Bucks), Natalie Bugeja (Afc), Peter Hodges (Bracknell Forest), Rachel Farrell (Bucks), Ashley Schofield (IoW), Sarah Smith (Hants), Carol Norrington Beard (Surrey), Keith Langley (West Berks), Rebecca Eligon (SESLIP support)

**Item 1: Minutes and actions from last meeting** agreed.

**Item 2: Item 1: Feedback from Milton Keynes’ recent ILACS and the focus on fostering**

Alison Miller presented (slide attached), she reflected that Milton Keynes has always been RI but this autumn we were judged Good for the first time with outstanding features. It felt a very positive, strength-based rather than deficit experience. The inspectors seemed interested and calm in their interactions with staff. It felt like the inspectors wanted to get the best out of staff.

AM reflected that they did a lot of work preparing staff so they felt ready and confident, made sure every fostering file was up to date and briefed foster carers who were selected. AM reflected that this felt important preparatory work and would encourage other services awaiting an inspection to do the same.

AM said the two issues identified last time were focus areas for the inspectors this time, so important for other LAs to check what happened in their last inspection. In Milton Keynes the two issues were:

* The support and management of children who are privately fostered.
* The quality and frequency of supervision and support of foster carers.

AM said the inspectors wanted to look at private fostering on the first day. They wanted us to sit with them and share our files (rather than accessing directly). We had picked up through audit it wasn’t clear who held parental responsibility so quite a bit of work happened in advance to ensure that was clear. It Is therefore worth checking that on all your Private fostering cases.

Ofsted were positive about the work we had done to raise awareness of private fostering in the community, family support teams, MASH. They found that “*Children who are privately fostered benefit from well-informed assessments that incorporate necessary checks and provide thorough social work analysis* *about their care. Effective work with partner agencies, including schools, GPs*  *and increased engagement with faith groups, is helping to identify other* *children in private fostering arrangements.’*

On the other theme they picked 3 children: a UASC carer, kinship and mainstream in house foster carer. They met with foster carers via MS teams, so we had to prepare them. One of the carers was a bit of a wildcard as she speaks her mind. They also met with chair of foster carer association, panel chair and head of service twice. Asked quite detailed questions.

Ofsted were also positive about foster carer support:

*“The recently appointed permanent fostering manager knows her team well and has in-depth knowledge of the fostering households. Foster carers spoke positively about the quality of support and guidance that they receive from supervising social workers. While foster carer recruitment is increasing, the current number of households is unable to meet the increasing demand. A high number of exemptions are used to increase foster carer capacity and a clear rationale is provided for each decision. Effective revised trauma-informed training and the development of a project to support groups of fostering households are positive. The fostering panel provides appropriate challenge and scrutiny.”*

They didn’t meet with the kinship team, but did meet with staff that provided kinship support, including applications to ASGSF applications, impact of therapy. They did quite an in depth look at SG rather than kinship, Reg 24 and assessment of connected persons. They were also positive about SG and use of FGC, they said

*“Children come into care in Milton Keynes when this is the right action to keep them safe and to ensure that their needs are properly met. Extensive efforts are made for children to live within their extended family, and family members participate in decisions, including through the use of family group conferences.*

*“Detailed and thorough kinship care assessments are undertaken by the fostering service. Family members receive extensive support, including through the family assessment and support team, to meet children’s needs. Formal agency decision-maker approval and effective matching arrangements provide assurance for children that they can remain with adults whom they trust and with whom they have an emotional bond, when it is safe to do so.”*

NB said: AfC has had 2 x ILACs and 1x fostering service inspection since October 2024 to February 2025 and said I she has to agree about the approach of inspectors.

SD said well done and it is interesting how they focus on some areas in depth, whereas in Portsmouth we didn’t have the opportunity to showcase as much as we would have liked to in fostering.

RF in Bucks said: We were similar in Bucks where we had limited time with inspectors to cover all the areas that we work across. This said, staff felt really positive about their experience within the inspectors.

JD said in Brighton and Hove just over a year ago felt very similar, so perhaps that is a format they are using, looking at 3 fostering cases. Also agree there has been a tonal shift. It did not feel adversarial as it had happened in the past. JD said they also offered sessions to social workers to help them feel more confident speaking to inspectors, especially for staff for whom it is the first time.

**Item 2: Delays in medicals: What is driving delays in medicals for foster carers?  Are there any issues that require escalation?  What if any discussions have been had via ICBs etc?**

SS: Said in Hants it isn’t just the delays, they are also not sticking with the agreed charges. SS was keen to understand if that is a wider issue? Many others agreed.

PH said also in Bracknell Forest the charges are quite indiscriminate and some GPs have point blank refused to provide a medical. PH said they have then had challenge from our foster panel who have rejected the report as the GP didn’t meet the person as they had to commission online GPs.

JC said in Portsmouth they are doing ok, have set up regular meetings via corporate parenting board. There are some surgeries charging but health partners are contributing to costs. They also have a lead GP who is brokering conversations with those that either refuse or don’t prioritise.

Hampshire, Milton Keynes, Brighton and Hove have all had to pay for private medicals.

AM said in Milton Keynes there has been a request for a 400% increase in fees for the medical advisor which hasn’t gone down well. Agreement between LA and health hasn’t been reviewed for a number of years in Milton Keynes and when the RAA was set up they looked at medical advisor role for adoption, but not fostering, so it isn’t clear. There has been no perm medical advisor for 2 years and one has just been appointed.

CS said it has been escalated and raised at senior levels in Brighton and Hove.

SD said it is clearly an issue that isn’t going away.

**Action:** SD has agreed to escalate and take to the regional DCS group that there are issues around cost and pace/delays regarding foster carer medicals.

**AOB:**

**Local Authority Fostering South East:** SD asked colleagues for input/ feedback regarding LAFSE. SD was asked by Mac Heath as DCS chair for SESLIP to provide input from this group following a conversation with Ads on Friday. SD said feedback from Mac Heath regarding the ADs was that there was a need for greater clarity around how coproduction and decision making would and should work for the regional recruitment hub. SD said this group has not had agenda items relating to the hub, as there are many other meetings that look at the hub, but asked the group if they would welcome that sort of conversation here moving forward.

AM from Milton Keynes said it would be a good idea. AM said the fostering hub leads meeting happened this morning, but it feels like we are being done to, not with, and it is quite difficult to push back, and this space would be helpful to think about any collective issues which need to be raised.

NB in AfC echoed there was a similar issue at the end of last year regarding marketing. We discussed worries about pictures, wording, then went to regional leads meeting where it was all agreed. NB said it then became clear that the hub couldn’t take our feedback on board because they had already signed things off prior to the engagement meeting happening. Events like the care experience conference is another issue. We weren’t clear what the agenda was but we were being asked to promote an event which we weren’t sure what the purpose was which made me feel uncomfortable.

MC said I agree with what Natalie is raising - this has been our experience in Kent - I would appreciate a forum where as a group of operational leaders we can work out what is an individual LA issue, and what is a collective issue to challenge where needed.

 SS from Hants said it is difficult when there are so many people and so many meetings and it isn’t clear which meeting you need to be in. When we were given the models for year 2 we hadn’t seen them before, we gave feedback and then the model changed overnight, which didn’t give confidence. SS said there have been lots of efforts to consult by the hub, but reflected that sometimes there are too many voices and it isn’t clear where decisions are being made.

PH, Bracknell is the host, I take on board the points that have been raised. I think being clear what decisions are being made at particular meetings would be helpful, so that the pipeline for decision making is clearer.

SD said there is a need for a stronger DCS steer. PH said perhaps bringing together operational leaders and DCSs would be helpful.

West berks and Brighton said they had poor outcomes on audit but because they didn’t complete demographic data which is what they had been advised by their LA information governance leads, this led to demoralisation for frontline staff.

**Action:**  GS and SD to meet with MH to discuss how this group can be used moving forward to help provide a space for LAs to provide feedback/identify key issues to ensure the success of the hub moving forward.

**Out of hours:** SS is looking at out of hours and emergency placements in Hants, so if anyone has any ideas, papers what is working well then please share.

JC in Portsmouth and CS in Brighton and Hove are also keen to be involved in this work. CS asked if people use a one phone number for out of hours calls for carers?

MC said in Kent - we have two numbers as such a large county for Fostering OOH until 11pm and then a  county number.

SS said in Hants they have an out of hours service which is the general number for all out of hours issues, on top of this we have an evening and weekend support line which runs 5-11pm weekdays and 9-11pm weekends where a fostering worker is on call to provide telephone support which might be to help deescalate, offer strategies or provide information.

**Upskilling children’s social workers:** JD asked the group what work fostering teams are doing to increase skill/knowledge of children’s social workers about fostering (JD highlighted the state of the nation survey which showed families had around a 70% satisfaction with supervising social workers but only 42% children’s social workers).

PH said they have worked in Bracknell Forest with managers to ensure that importance and understanding of fostering is part of the culture.

NB said we did a whole organisational training on fostering; we had carers do workshops and presentation - also promoted our thank you fee to staff for putting someone forward. We also have one coming up this week solely on kinship

KL said they have training in place for children’s social workers in West Berks but also agree with PH that it has to be service manager led

CA said: We are now involved in our ASYE training so the fostering service have a morning slot to provide an overview of fostering service and this is done with a foster carer, we are also planning a 'fostering take over' at an all staff forum for foster carers to give their view of what they need from CSW's, CA is also presenting at our Snr management team with a foster carer to help make it a priority for other HoS to feed the expectations down to their teams... We are also really lucky that we have sponsorship for a foster carer ball and we ask foster carers and CSW's to nominate each other for specific awards to support them to recognise each others’ work.

JC said we have a fostering day with the academy and talk about all things fostering, one of our carers suggested team around the foster carer training for everyone, which we are now putting into practice in Portsmouth

**Agreed themes for next time:**

* Out of hours support and emergency placements, a themed discussion for all to share on how this works in your LA
* Local Authority Fostering South east (pending discussion between SD and Grainne Siggins and Mac Heath)

**Action log: updated 12 March** Shaded lines, actions are complete

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|  | **Action** | **Responsible** | **Date issued** | **Status** |
| **47** | GS and SD to meet with MH to discuss how this group can be used moving forward to help provide a space for LAs to provide feedback/identify key issues to ensure the success of the hub moving forward. | SD | March 2025 | open |
| **46** | SD has agreed to escalate and take to the regional DCS group that there are issues around cost and pace/delays regarding foster carer medicals. | SD | March 2025 | open |
| **45** | SD asked the group to find out and report back: What is driving delays is it capacity, payment, or it isn’t part of the commissioned offer, is it costing too much? What is the issue. Have you escalated in place-based partnerships and ICB risk logs? | ALL | Dec 2024 | complete |
| **44** | Oxfordshire (Julie McNally) Hampshire (Sarah Smith), Brighton and hove (Cathy Seiderer) and Portsmouth (Jackie Clark) to catch up outside the meeting on sharing practice/approaches re: support to foster carers in the first year. CS to convene this group. | JM SS CS JC | Dec 2024 | open |
| 43 | SD to draft letter to ICBs in region setting out the impact of delays in medical assessments | SD | Oct 2024 | complete |
| 42 | HB to share business case/thinking behind salaried foster carers (c.£60k, 10 months a year, 3 carers on rotation) when it is ready | HB | Oct 2024 | open |
| 41 | PH, KL and SA to meet to get a consistent approach to police input across the Thames valley. | PH KL SA | Oct 2024 | Complete |
| 40 | Brighton and Hove to share support for foster carers in first year and wellness action plan | CS | Oct 2024 | Complete |
| 39 | Mark Vening and Peter Hodges to have a quick catch up and report back re: DBS accessibility | MV PH | Mar 2024 | Complete |
| 38 | SS to speak to Oxfordshire to see if there is anything we can learn from the duty senior prac. | SS | Mar 2024 | complete |
| 37 | Idea of 1. offer and assessment approach for those not yet ready to be foster carers and 2. Development of guide for first calls/conversations to be developed through hub | RE/AMA | Oct 2023 | complete |
| 36 | LAs to share foster panel member payscales with SS to collate | SS | Oct 2023 | closed |
| 35 | Action : RE to circulate UASC documentation from Martin Tuck to Cathy | RE | Oct 2023 | complete |
| 34 | If any further LAs wish to submit information (caseload and number of carers recruited) please send to Rebecca. Will need number of carers recruited in 2022/23 for all LAs in fostering hub. | RE | July 2023 | Closed |
| 33 | Brighton and Hove said their website is being updated over the summer and please ensure that mystery shopping does not happen until after the relaunch | RE | July 2023 | complete |
| 32 | Future discussion – increasing quality of ISW assessments (October 2023) | RE | April 2023 | Complete |
| 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 | Complete |