

# Fostering First – Our commitment to Foster Carers

## Introduction

The Council Plan for 2016-2020 sets out our commitment to protecting vulnerable children from harm and neglect and provide support so every child has the opportunity to succeed.

And whilst our family support approach means that we work very hard to keep families safely together, sometimes children need to come into our care.

So, as part of our Council Plan commitments we have pledged to increase the number of high quality local placements for children and young people, meaning children who come into care are well matched with a local foster placement that really meets their needs.

To deliver on this pledge we know there is more to do to improve the way we work with and support our foster carers. This booklet sets out how we want our relationship with foster carers to develop and some of the things we are going to do in 2018. **These are shown in bold.**

## Attracting diverse and resilient foster carers

Over 200 of our children in care live with Milton Keynes foster carers. If we are to deliver on our pledge to offer a local foster placement to every child who needs one, we will need to recruit more carers from a range of backgrounds to reflect the diversity in our local community and of the children and young people we care for.

Potential carers hear about us in lots of different ways – sometimes through friends who foster, or by knowing about a child who needs a home.

But we think there are more people who would make great foster carers. **So, we will launch new and engaging recruitment campaigns alongside improvements to the information and advice we offer when people make contact.**

Our aim is to attract people with the skills needed for this important, rewarding and sometimes challenging work – and that includes resilience - as often one of the most important thing carers can offer is placement stability.

Once people interested in fostering have made contact, it's important we get the assessment process right. It enables us to discover potential carers' strengths and development needs and to grow their skills and understanding.

We want all our assessments to be thorough but timely, delivering the right combination of support and challenge to prepare carers for their unique role in the team of professionals surrounding each individual child.

It is important that there always needs to be a high level of commitment from our foster carers to working with all the people in a child's life to give them the best chance of a happy childhood and becoming a successful adult.

Foster carers are not, nor do they need to be, social workers. But foster carers need to be able to play their full part in the professional team. **So, we will develop a clear set of roles and responsibilities for foster carers in relation to things like contributing to children's reviews and personal education planning.**

## **Investing in and training our foster carers**

We want all our carers to have a development programme of essential core training and tailored support to equip them to meet individual children's special needs. We know some of our training could be improved. **So, we will explore the options to work with our adult education experts at Community Learning MK to do just that.**

We aim to meet annually with each carer to review what they are offering and agree what needs to be in their development plan. These are important meetings.

In addition to payments to cover the costs of caring for children of different ages, our carers are paid a 'fee' in their fostering allowance which recognises our expectations of them as key members of the team around each child. Completing personal development work and evidence of the agreed skills required to care for children with complex needs is evidence for progression to a higher 'fee' during a carer's fostering career.

## **Promoting education, health and well being**

Our virtual school is led by an experienced head teacher and support team. They work with schools, carers and children to agree a personal education plan (PEP). As part of our work, we try to ensure children in care are in schools judged 'good' or better.

Many children in care have had life experiences which affect their emotional well-being. As well as the support offered to all children through schools and health services, we have a range of more specialist support on offer. We also offer foster carers a monthly group consultation with a child and adolescent psychotherapist and work closely with specialist mental health services colleagues.

Our Looked After Children's nurses and designated doctor know our children and their carers well. They offer valuable advice and support which many carers and young people use far more frequently than in their required annual health checks.

## **Preparing for their future**

As well as providing the best possible care today, we want foster carers to prepare children and young people for the next stage of their journey to successful adulthood.

Younger children may need preparation for a return home to their birth family, or a move on to adoption or a long term foster placement.

For older young people, that might mean support moving onto further or higher education, an apprenticeship or job with training. **But too many of our care leavers are still not in education, employment or training and tackling this is a high priority for us in the year ahead.**

Children and young people's future needs are discussed and agreed at regular reviews with their social workers and other key professionals. A wide range of support and advice is available to carers to support this preparation work, tailored to each individual child or young person.

Young people moving on from foster care have access to a range of accommodation, including supported lodgings, independent living and perhaps accommodation linked to education or training.

When older young people are settled in their foster placements, carers are encouraged to offer them a home after their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. 'Staying put' post-18 placements can offer support to young adults as they move into independence and enable them and their carers to plan the best time for that move.

Leaving care can be a difficult time. A review of our services for care leavers carried out last year identified some areas for development.

**So, we will review our support for care leavers, looking specifically at how we can better meet young people's needs and publish a 'local offer' for care leavers setting out information about local services offered for young people leaving care.**

## **Caring for our carers**

Well-supported carers provide good support. Our aim is to ensure that support is there for every carer whenever it is needed and that separate support is available from an allocated social worker for every child.

**To make things better, we will restructure our fostering team to free up fostering social workers to focus upon work with our existing foster carers, whilst different workers recruit and assess new carers.**

We share a commitment to improvement in everyone's practice and foster carers are no different. We will improve our efforts to gather feedback, so that we can develop our systems and celebrate and challenge individual foster carers.

Our foster carers have a lot to offer each other. We will continue to encourage mentoring opportunities, particularly between new carers and those with more experience.

We know foster carers want us to improve the way we communicate and engage with them. **So, in 2018 we will give foster carers a greater say in policy and practice development through a new foster carers forum. We will also launch a new regular briefing for all foster**

**carers to find out about key local issues and wider developments from the Director and Lead Member for Children's Services.**

## **Safeguarding**

Sometimes, we need to address safeguarding concerns. We will never make assumptions about the likely outcome of our investigations and will ensure that they are dealt with promptly and that foster carers are supported throughout, including access to independent advice, where appropriate.

Foster carers have their own needs and commitments or sometimes just need a break. We have other foster carers who play an important role by supporting carers providing long term care for some of our more challenging young people to have a break.

Leaflet reference M18030 – March 2018

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