

TITLE	Fostering Transformation Update
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 March 2023
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Helen Watson

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Strengthening the fostering service to meet the needs of more Children in Care, supporting them to stay close to family, friends, community, and those who care for them most.

RECOMMENDATION

This report is for information only.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The Council faces several challenges in relation to placement sufficiency:

- Offering suitable placements in foster households through existing providers will be difficult over the next three years particularly for older children, children with complex needs, children with disabilities and sibling groups.
- The number of children in care is increasing while nationally demand for residential children's home placements and Independent Foster Agency (IFA) placements outstrips supply in the external market.
- The low number of IFA placements and children's homes placements in Wokingham.
- Increasing numbers of children with more than three placement moves.
- A lack of local provision in borough resulting in more children being placed out of borough than in borough.

In response to these challenges Children's Services has commissioned a review of the current Fostering Service.

The 'Fostering Transformation Steering Group' (FTSG) was set up to lead and provide oversight and governance to an agreed programme of work to review the Council's current fostering arrangements, and, if necessary, develop a future model of delivery which is evidence based and needs led.

The FTSG is chaired by the Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) and AD, Children's Services, Social Care and Early Help and has members from Commissioning, Performance, Finance and Corporate Parenting.

The Steering Group formally reports to the Children's Services Directorate Leadership Team (CDLT). The Steering Group provides regular highlight reports and/or updates against the major milestones of the project plan. These updates are provided via the Project Manager.

In addition, there is regular engagement and consultation with The Lead Member for Children's Services.

The final report and business case will be presented to CDLT for approval in April 2023.

1. Background

Consultation with all members of the fostering service, carers, other social care professionals and finance and data officers alongside consideration of the 2021-24 Fostering Recruitment and Retention Strategy and the Oct 22 Update Report has led to the understanding that Wokingham Fostering would benefit from:

- A greater focus on foster carer recruitment, utilisation and permanence.
- Ensuring that we continue to have competitive fees, allowances and benefits.
- Bringing carers to the forefront of everything we do.
- Preparing and supporting carers to meet the needs of more children and young people.
- A targeted UASC fostering recruitment strategy aligned with further developing local after care accommodation and resources.
- Using Family Finding as part of the carer recruitment drive.
- Updating the Recruitment & Retention Strategy to consider recent needs analysis, carers', and children's feedback.

Like many fostering services, Wokingham Fostering has struggled to recruit the target 10 carers a year over the last 2 years. Some new carers have struggled to settle in to the role, feeling isolated and unprepared coming out of Covid. The new fostering manager has already addressed some of these issues by installing a Buddy Scheme for applicants and new carers and revising the pre-approval training.

Carers report that the Covid period has limited their social interaction outside of well attended formal events. They would like more opportunities to network, get support from, and offer support to other carers. They have also asked to be more involved in the running of the service. To this end 6 carers are now attending the fortnightly Recruitment & Retention Board that is overseeing the delivery of the fostering transformation project.

Lastly, and most importantly there is a growing Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) fostering population that is mainly being cared for through Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) at some considerable distance from the local authority. Engagement events have already begun with some community groups to publicise Wokingham's needs, but this will need particular focus if we are going to start to build in-house and/or local fostering resource.

2. Needs Analysis

The last year

All fostering

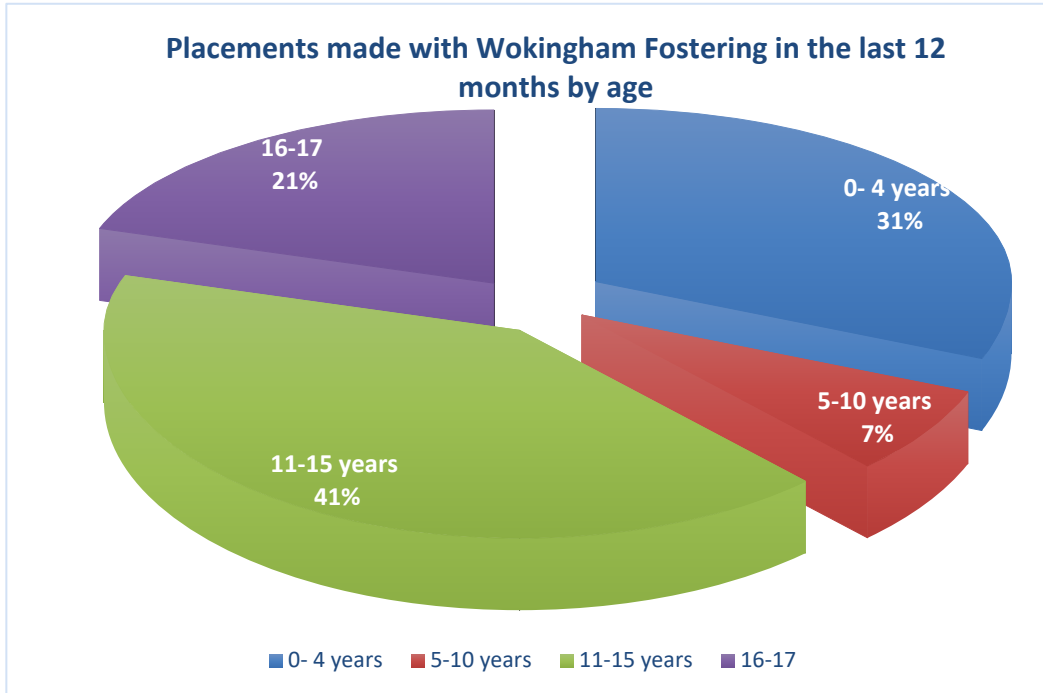
In the last 12 months (Mar 22- Feb 23), 50 fostering placements were made. Of these, 25 children were placed In-house (including Connected Persons) and 25 were placed with IFAs. 2 children were part of a sibling group and placed together with in-house carers.

UASC

Of the 25 children placed in IFAs over the last 12 months, 21 were UASC. Only one young UASC was placed in-house.

Age

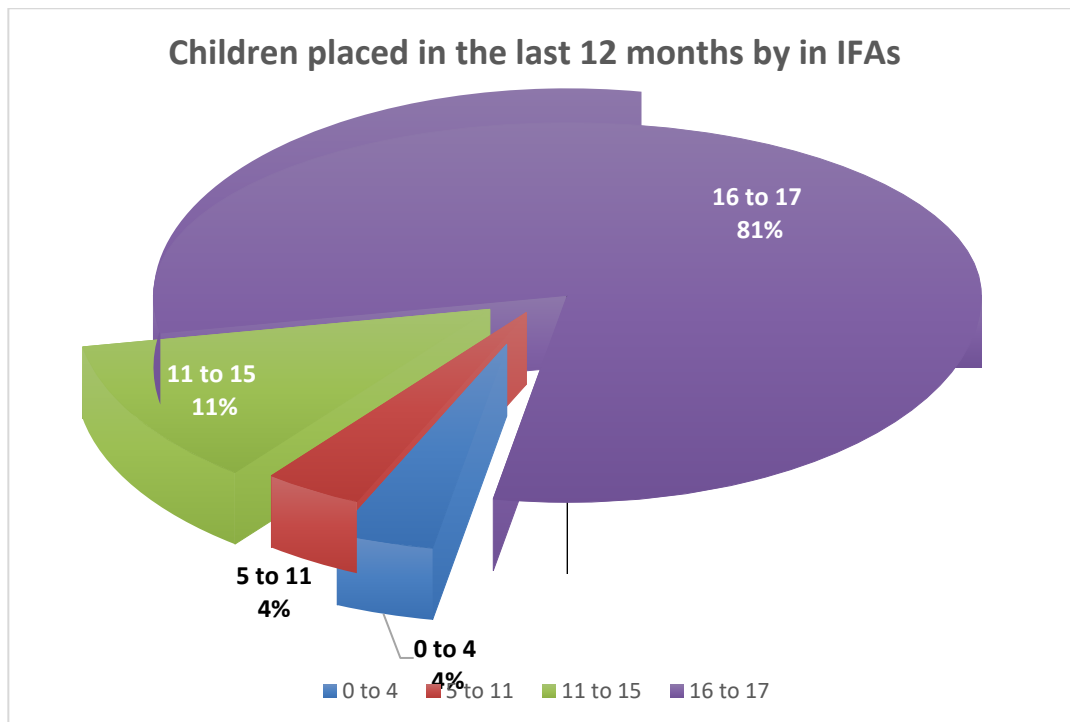
For in-house, the main age group placed was 11-15 years (41%) with the lowest age group being 5-10 years (7%). The average age of all children was 11 years 3 months.



In comparison, the average age for children placed with IFAs was 14 years 11 months. This is high because most of the placements were for UASC with an average age of just below 16.

4 non-UASC were placed with IFAs. 1 was part of a Parent & Child fostering arrangement and the other 3 were aged 7, 13 and 15 years.

This evidences that in-house fostering has been relatively successful in placing most non-UASC children referred to them, including children in the higher age groups. However, this data does not include all referrals made, just outcomes of placements made.



Permanence

In the last 12 months, 13 children exited Wokingham fostering via permanence:

- 7 Special Guardianship Orders (SGO)
- 4 Adoptions
- 2 Child Arrangement Orders (CAO)

In addition to these, more children were subject to SGOs and CAOs being awarded prior to their carers being approved as full-time foster carers.

Long Term foster matches are approved at the Permanency Panel rather than at Fostering Panel. There is little external family finding outside of children with particularly complex needs.

Overall picture

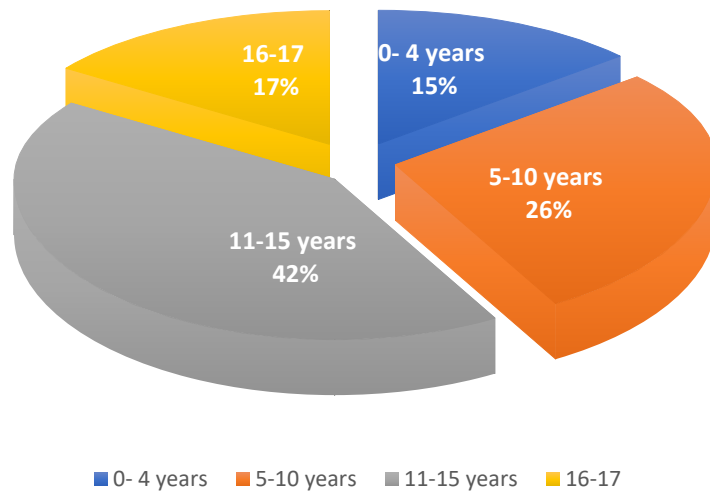
In-house

As of February 2023, there are 57 children being cared for by Wokingham Fostering. 43 children in mainstream fostering and 14 in Family & Friends (Connected Persons) homes.

The average age of these children is 11 years 1 month. The largest age group of children placed is 11-15 years (41% of children). The smallest age group is 0-4 years (15%).

12 young adults are with Staying Put carers, 2 of whom are UASC care leavers.

Children currently placed in-house fostering (Feb 23) by age

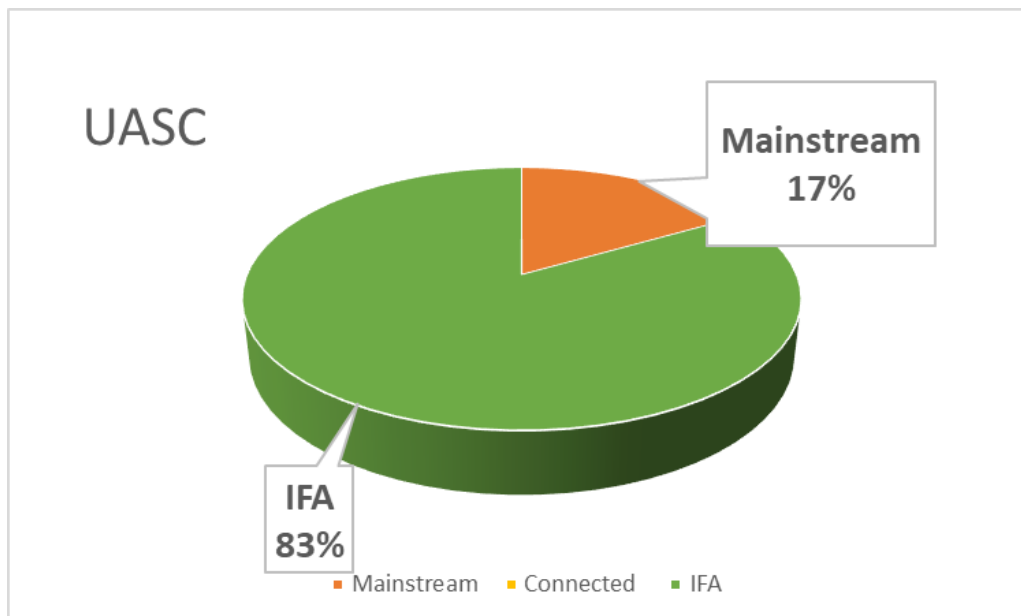


All fostering

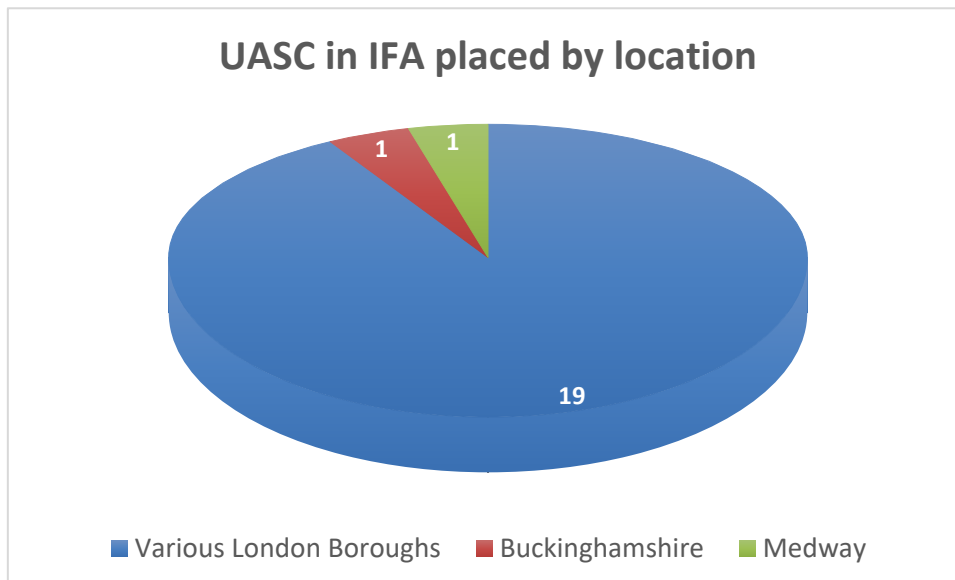
Of the 85 children or young people in foster placements, 57 are placed in-house and 28 are with IFAs. If we remove UASC children or young people, there are 59 children in fostering placements, 52 in-house and 7 IFA.

UASC

26 UASC children are cared for within fostering 21 in IFA and 5 in-house.



The 21 UASC with IFAs are all placed outside the borough with 19 young people in 16 different London boroughs.



These 21 placements are with 14 different IFAs.

3. Initial Findings

- Placements
 - High usage of in-house fostering with 74% of children in fostering, living with in house carers. Of these 32% are living in a Connected household.
 - The largest age group being cared for in-house is 11–15-year-olds at 41%.
 - Only 17% of UASC are living with in-house foster carers.
 - Limited carer availability in the service for new placements, especially for more complex children, sibling groups and unaccompanied young people.
 - No dedicated duty officer time.
 - Training and support offer needs to be tailored to both prepare new and develop current carers to meet more complex needs.
- Recruitment
 - New website being built to increase applications through a better representation of the fostering role and greater engagement with enquirers.
 - ‘Buddy’ system launched for applicants to support them through the process.
 - Pre-approval training to be revamped to address new carer preparedness.
- Permanence
 - Established Family & Friends Team leading on a good percentage of children living with Connected Persons via fostering or through early permanence through SGO prior to approval.
- Staff
 - ATMs with strong relationships with foster carers. Newly recruited experienced and committed fostering manager.
 - Mockingbird close to launch with Liaison worker appointed and potential Hub carers identified.

- Carers
 - Competitive carer allowances and benefits including paid council tax, annual bonus.
 - Outside of recruitment, carer participation in the service is low.

4. Interim Objectives

- Increase recruitment focus, improve the customer service, applicant response and reduce assessment times.
- Evidence to the carers the value we place on the foster carer role, and our commitment to their support needs.
- Improve carer utilisation, permanence options and increase SSW availability to work with carers.
- Support carers to maintain the children in their care and consider additional or more challenging children.
- Help prepare & develop carers knowledge, skills, resilience, and capacity to care for current and future children and young people, through understanding and supporting their training needs better.
- Enable unaccompanied young people to stay local to Wokingham to enhance their opportunities to settle well and establish themselves

5. Completed Milestones

- Initial findings presented
- Action plan developed
- Carer consultation started
- Carer led Recruitment & Retention Board established
- Staff discussions completed
- Carer utilisation work
- Panels and process observed
- UASC recruitment event at Islamic Centre

6. Next steps

Action	By When
Revised Marketing Plan	20/03/23
Costs and options to be finalised	20/03/23
Skills to Foster observations	14/03/23

Business case with final recommendations to be presented to Fostering Steering Group	31/03/23
Recommendations to be presented and considered by the Children's Services Directorate Leadership Team.	April 2023

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces unprecedented financial pressures as a result of; the longer term impact of the COVID-19 crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the general economic climate of rising prices and the increasing cost of debt. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are optimised and are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	n/a		
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	n/a		
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	n/a		

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
n/a

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)
n/a

Public Sector Equality Duty
Please confirm that due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty has been taken and if an equalities assessment has been completed or explain why an equalities assessment is not required.

Climate Emergency – This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030
Please state clearly what the impact of the decision being made would be on the Council's carbon neutral objective.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

List of Background Papers

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