

## Fostering Services Annual Report 2023/24



As a service, we aim to be:

- F – forward-thinking and focused on the continued professional development of our staff and our carers
- O – open to transparent communication and participation with our fostering families
- S – safe, secure and stable
- T – trustworthy and reliable
- E – encouraging and proactive in respect of our fostering families' education and training
- R – robust in respect of statutory and regulatory compliance
- I – innovative in terms of service organisation and development
- N – nurturing, supportive and caring
- G – guided by best practice

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## 1. Executive summary

This document is intended to read alongside the revised Torbay Fostering Statement of Purpose 2023-24.

Torbay Council have continued to revise their sufficiency strategy. The aims of the Sufficiency Strategy 2021-24 are summarised below:

### Torbay's Sufficiency Strategy

*Torbay Council's vision is to provide sufficient care in the community and high quality placements for children and young people in its care which meet their needs and offer the necessary support to enable their aspirations to become their reality.*

#### Torbay aims to:

- Strengthen the delivery of edge of care, early help, early intervention, and prevention services.
- Increase the numbers of in-house foster carers and review our existing bank of carers to develop and match their skills to the needs of our children.
- Reduce the use of out of local area provision which may disadvantage our children and young people.
- Increase the number of adopters who can adopt children who are known to be harder to place.
- Provide young people who are leaving care with a variety of placement choices and support to independence.
- Provide a robust commissioning framework which is effectively responding to the sufficiency challenges and driving up standards.
- Improve the overall data capture and data management of cared for children to better inform this strategy and improve accurate responses to sufficiency challenges.
- Raise our aspirations for educational attainment and other outcomes for cared for children.
- Continue to build on the strength of the Torbay Corporate Parenting Board.

This report will identify some of the improvements and challenges made in terms of performance, participation, fostering recruitment and the implementation of a restorative model which incorporates our fostering families.

This is a report of the Fostering Service and covers the period of 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.

This report will address the roles and functions of the Fostering Service and should be read in conjunction with the Fostering Statement of Purpose 2023-24.

Throughout 2023-24, the Fostering Service has continued to ensure that there are a range of placement options for children which offer both high quality and cultural appropriateness.

Please note, for the purpose of this document, the word 'placement' is used throughout. In line with the implementation of the restorative model, it is fully recognized that this word may not be the right choice for individual children; however, each child will wish for the place where they live to be called something different, and home can have powerful connotations for cared for children and young people and therefore 'placement' is used in this instance.

## **2. Profile of cared for children**

Torbay were corporate parents, as of the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, to 298 cared for children; this overall figure also incorporated fourteen Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) who Torbay had welcomed either as part of the National Transfer Scheme or through representation as UASC by residents placed at local asylum hotels. The number of cared for children decreased over the year 2023-24 and stood at 298 as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, compared with 314 at the same point the previous year. The decrease was due to a combination of preventative work that reduced the number of children becoming cared for in the year along with a substantial reduction in unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) presenting in Torbay.

There is evidence to suggest that permanency for Torbay's cared for children has continued to improve, with further progress in adoptions and staying put arrangements coupled with SGOs all outperforming statistical neighbours and national averages. There were 11 children adopted throughout the year 2023/24 out of 97 total children who ceased to be cared for, equating to 12%. This compares favourably with the Torbay figure of 4% in 2022/23 and 3% in 2021/22 and demonstrates the strength that Torbay is showing in leading the way across the South West Peninsular with regards to adoption performance. 43 young people ceased to be cared for in the 2023/24 year who were aged 18 or over at that point. 25 of those were in foster placements at the point they ceased to be cared for. Of those 25, 13 remained Staying Put with their foster carers. That is 52% of children in foster care ceasing to be cared for aged 18 or over who Stayed Put.

As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, 77% of children in foster care in Torbay were in in-house provision. Although this is now close to the national average of 76% and substantially higher than last year's figure of 57%, there remain challenges with in-house foster placement sufficiency connected to factors such as the aging profile of long-term foster carers who have retired and the challenges in recruiting new foster carers against a backdrop of a cost of living crisis. 49% of children in foster care were in long-term placements at the end of the year, an increase from 39% in the previous year and this is a reflection of more robust permanency planning and tracking through Permanence Panel. Long-term matching also allows decisions to be made with children and their foster carers around reduced visiting which in turn allows cared for children to experience childhoods that feature less intrusion from the Local Authority.

The number of children placed more than 20 miles away is still significantly above the statistical neighbours and national average. The figure of 34% for 2023/24 is slightly higher than the previous year (31% in 2022/23). There are many reasons a cared for child might be placed out of county and at a distance from the address they lived in at the point of becoming cared for, and significant analysis of our cared for population identifies many of these reasons to be in line with the distinct and bespoke wishes and feelings or best interests. For example, 3% of those children are placed for adoption, and 16% placed with family or friends in the locality of their address; similarly, in line with their wishes and feelings, 5% of this cohort are Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) who have expressly asked to be placed in more urban areas. Those children and young people who require specialist settings, such as secure or residential provision, are all placed more than twenty miles away from the address they lived in at the point of becoming cared for also.

Torbay continue to recognise the increased vulnerability of children placed at a distance from Torbay, and this is reflected in the Out of County Placement Protocol which advises of the specific role of the social worker, Team Manager and senior leadership team in supporting these cared

for children and tracking and monitoring their placements, as well as particular expectations in terms of placement and care planning. This Protocol is updated on a quarterly basis.

Torbay continues to focus on expanding the range of foster placement options available to our children. This understanding of the needs of our cared for children is used continuously to inform and enhance our fostering recruitment strategy and planning which continues to be focused on expanding the in-house placement options available to:

- Cared for children between the ages of 13-17.
- Cared for children who require placements alongside their siblings.
- Cared for children with additional or complex needs.
- Cared for children who are transitioning from residential settings into fostering families. -
- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC).

As outlined in previous Annual Reports, it remains imperative that placement sufficiency, and in particular the development of our in-house fostering provision, remains a key strategic priority and the work with the regional fostering hub and the implementation of the Mockingbird project are just two examples of how this work will develop over 2024-25. There is a continued need for a collective view that our cared for children have a right and a need for high quality, safe placements in their local area.

**Cared for children on 31st March 2024 by placement type:**

Placements at 31st March 2024		Number	%
Foster placement with relative or friend	Inside local authority	23	8%
	Outside local authority	16	5%
Placement with other foster carer:	Inside local authority	109	37%
	Outside local authority	76	26%
Secure unit		0	0%
Homes and hostels (residential care, K2 code)		16	5%

Placements at 31st March 2024	Number	%
Hostels and other supportive residential placements (H5 code)	15	5%
Residential schools	0	0%
Other residential settings (codes R1, R2, R3, R5)	1	0%
Placed for adoption (including placed with former foster carer)	5	2%
Placed with own parents	24	8%
In lodgings, residential employment or living independently	0	0%
Other placements (Z1) (DfE guidance suggests use for unregulated foster care only)	13	4%

The national picture is as follows:

	2021/22	2022/23
Foster care (U codes)	70%	54%
Placed for adoption (A codes)	3%	3%
Placed with own parents (code P1)	7%	9%
Children's homes (code K2)	16%	21%
Hostels / Semi-independent living accommodation not subject to Children's Homes regulations (code H5)		
Secure units (code K1)		
Residential schools (code S1)	-	-
Other residential (adult residential care homes, NHS provision, family centres, mother and baby units, YOIs or prison - R codes)	1%	4%
Independent living (code P2)	2%	5%
Other (mostly unregulated foster placements with family / friends, code Z1)	2%	4%

**NOTE:** The national data groups several codes together (K2 children's homes, H5 supported living and K1 secure units), so comparisons are not straightforward, but in general the national and local pictures are similar.

### 3. Key Priorities and Actions of the Service in 2023/24

The key priorities and actions of the service in 2023/24 have been:

- Continuing to identify and enhance ways to capture the voice of our fostering families and use this feedback to improve and enhance fostering assessment and services. ***This action is ongoing and forms a foundational aspect of the Regulated Service Plan.***
- Expanding and developing the Corporate Parenting Offer for fostering families, cared for children, care experienced young people, parent/carers and Special Guardians throughout the year. ***Ongoing.***
- Reviewing the training provided to foster carers on a regular basis. ***Ongoing.***
- Running high quality and varied support groups, both internally to provide foster carers with therapeutic and emotional support. ***Ongoing.***
- Providing bespoke and individualized plans of support, to enhance placement stability, inclusive of out of hours support from the Building Futures Together team and intensive support programmes which last up to sixteen weeks, when needed to stabilise the placement. ***Ongoing.***
- Reviewing the Fostering Recruitment Strategy. ***Achieved.***
- Home for Good finalised their contract after three years of commissioning by Torbay Council. Home for Good is a national Christian fostering and adoption focused charity working to inspire Christians to foster or adopt and equipping the church communities to support those who are caring for vulnerable children. Home for Good works with local authorities to develop and strengthen connections with local churches around foster carer recruitment and retention so they can best meet their obligations as corporate parents to the children in their care. Home for Good made 1 referral in 2023/24 which progressed to assessment. In 2023-24, one family was identified through the charity and subsequently approved through Panel. ***Achieved.***
- Enhancing the impact of our Quarterly Fostering Forums, to ensure that they provide a direct platform for collaboration on our model and implementation of services and provide an open portal of discussion relating to current live issues/events between our carers, social workers, managers, the Virtual School and the Head of Service. The Participation team also regularly attend Foster Carer Support Groups and meet with our Cared for Council. This also supports the development of our collaborative working response, with our carers, thereby embedding the restorative and co-produced approach to our improvements. ***Achieved.***



- Torbay Council received Fostering Friendly accreditation from the Fostering Network in May 2023. We launched this during our Fostering and Social Worker Celebration Event on all social media channels and the Council website. We continue to actively promote this to local business groups and the plan is to roll this out more widely in the Torbay community. **Achieved.**
- Celebrating the commitment and achievements of our fostering families through the Letters of Thanks scheme, the Children's Celebration event and our fostering communications. **Ongoing.**
- Audits focused on the bridging to adoption process and the voice of foster carers were undertaken, with the learning feeding into service improvement. **Achieved.**
- Considering and implementing the new reforms of Stable Homes, Built on Love. The principle of kinship care has featured heavily in developing enhanced training for our connected carers with our foster carers. We are also committed to the Mockingbird approach of foster care which will develop supportive networks and a stronger sense of community for our children and young people in Torbay and also for their foster carers and connected carers. **Ongoing.**
- Family Hubs have been launched and are now part of each of the three towns which make up Torbay. This means that there is community support that is accessible in each area, including universal support for fostering and kinship families. The support offered by the Special Guardianship team through the Hubs will continue to be promoted as a priority in Torbay. **Ongoing.**

## Mockingbird

Torbay Council has partnered with the Fostering Network to deliver the Mockingbird Family Model. This is an innovative extended family model that aims to improve the stability of fostering placements for our cared for children/young people and strengthen the overall relationships between carers, children/young people, fostering services and birth families. Our goal is especially to ensure that sibling attachments and relationships are supported to thrive.

Mockingbird is an alternative way of providing foster care. It involves 6-10 foster carers becoming part of a group with other foster carers who are part of a wider constellation of satellite foster homes. The satellite homes in turn are supported by a central hub home, which provides advice and support to all the satellite homes.

The hub home and the satellite homes are supported by the fostering service which provides a worker to take on a liaison role across the whole Constellation.

The hub home provides children and their carers with support including sleepovers where appropriate and shared social activities on a 1 x monthly basis for all members of the constellation.

Torbay also plans to use the Mockingbird model as part of our foster care recruitment promotion for the future. We currently have a project lead who is working closely with the Fostering Network, with our immediate colleagues from within Torbay's fostering service and with several other key colleagues who are actively involved in ensuring we are driving our ambition of the successful implementation of Mockingbird within Torbay. It is hoped that 2 young people from our cared for council will be part of driving the project to ensure the voice of children/young people is clearly heard in our overall implementation.

The aim of the Mockingbird family model is to improve placement stability for children who are looked after, prioritise sibling connection, promote active child protection, support permanence and improve the support provided to foster carers, so that foster carers feel more supported, valued and less isolated.

The model fits with Torbay's approach of putting families at the centre of finding solutions and solving problems using restorative approaches. From a number of evaluations carried out, including by the UK Government, the positive impacts of the Mockingbird project, includes:- Reduced placement breakdown, Improved placement stability, Improved sibling contact, Improved experience of peer support, Improved experience of birth family contact, Improved levels of carer recruitment / retention, Improved process / experience of respite care, Improved skills, confidence and role satisfaction for foster carers, Building a network of strong / authentic relationships able to replicate support of extended family.

Extensive planning is currently underway in order to ensure that we are in a position to successfully launch our first Mockingbird constellation in Torbay by March 2025.

## **4. The Role of the Fostering Service**

The Fostering Service continues to develop and improve practice to meet the needs of cared for children in Torbay in line with the requirements of National Minimum Standards 2011 and Fostering Regulations. Torbay Fostering Service aim a range of fostering placements which meet the needs of our cared for children: Whilst there are universal standards within our fostering offering of care there are individual specialisms/focuses that carers can offer to our children:

### **Emergency Fostering Placements**

- These are carers who can offer a fostering family home at short notice, and for short period of time at point of need in an emergency.

### **Short Term Fostering Placements**

- These are carers who are able to offer a fostering family home on a short term basis; this could be for anything up to two years, for children who are cared for subject to proceedings and who need a safe and secure home whilst decisions are made about their care. These carers may then be involved in bridging to adoption, support to reunification, transition to other family care arrangements, transition to a longer term fostering placement or bridging to independence.

### **Long Term/Permanent Placements**

- These are carers who can offer a fostering family home to children whose plan is one of long-term fostering, and when final decisions have been made that a child cannot return home to the care of their parent/s or previous caregiver. These long-term placements offer security and stability for children for their minority and often into their adulthood. These carers make a long-term commitment to a child, and are often matched as a long term permanent placement for the child following a year in placement, through the Permanence Panel supported by an up to date assessment and recommendation of the child's allocated social worker.

### **Respite Placements /Stay Overs**

- These are carers who are able to offer a fostering family home to children, who are often in a long-term matched placement, as part of their plan of stability and permanence within that placement, to provide appropriate support to long term carers. At times, these placements may be use as a short-term measure, and as part of the bridging process to alternative placements for a child at point of need.

## **Parent and Child Placements**

- Torbay currently offer limited parent and child placements however we have identified several carers who have an interest in offering this type of placement and are actively looking to support progression of this interest by supporting focused training opportunities and a development programme to move this forward and expand our service offer and expertise within our fostering families. Currently we are meeting this need of our service through specialist placement agencies that offer this level of expertise. These are carers with specific training who can offer placement to parent/s and child/ren. These may be young parents, under the age of sixteen, or parents of any age, who require intensive support, guidance, and modelling to developing their parenting capacity in a safe environment.

## **Placements for Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers**

- These are carers who are able to offer a fostering family home to unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people, to enable them to adjust fully to being in a new country, and provide a nurturing safe base from which these young people can begin to recover from their experiences and forge a life for themselves in their new surroundings and communities.

## **Sibling placements**

- These are carers who are able to offer a fostering family home to sibling groups, not only in respect of providing accommodation, which is suitably sized for the sibling group, but carers who are suitably skilled to manage the presenting needs of each child within a sibling group of two or more children.

## **Resilience placements**

- Resilience foster carers are carers who can offer a fostering family home to support young people aged 10-18 years who currently live in residential care and/or who may have particularly complex needs, or young people who may be in the youth justice system. For those who have the knowledge, skills and experience to care for a child with these needs, it's a unique fostering opportunity where carers provide long term, family-based placements, with the intention of fostering one young person and supporting them into adult life. We are developing our capacity in this area of care through our fostering recruitment strategy to assess suitably skilled potential carers through this route, in addition to exploring opportunity of training and development from our existing cohort of carers to expand on their current offer.

## **Staying Put Placements**

- These are carers who can offer a home to those care experienced young people aged eighteen and above who they have previously fostered.

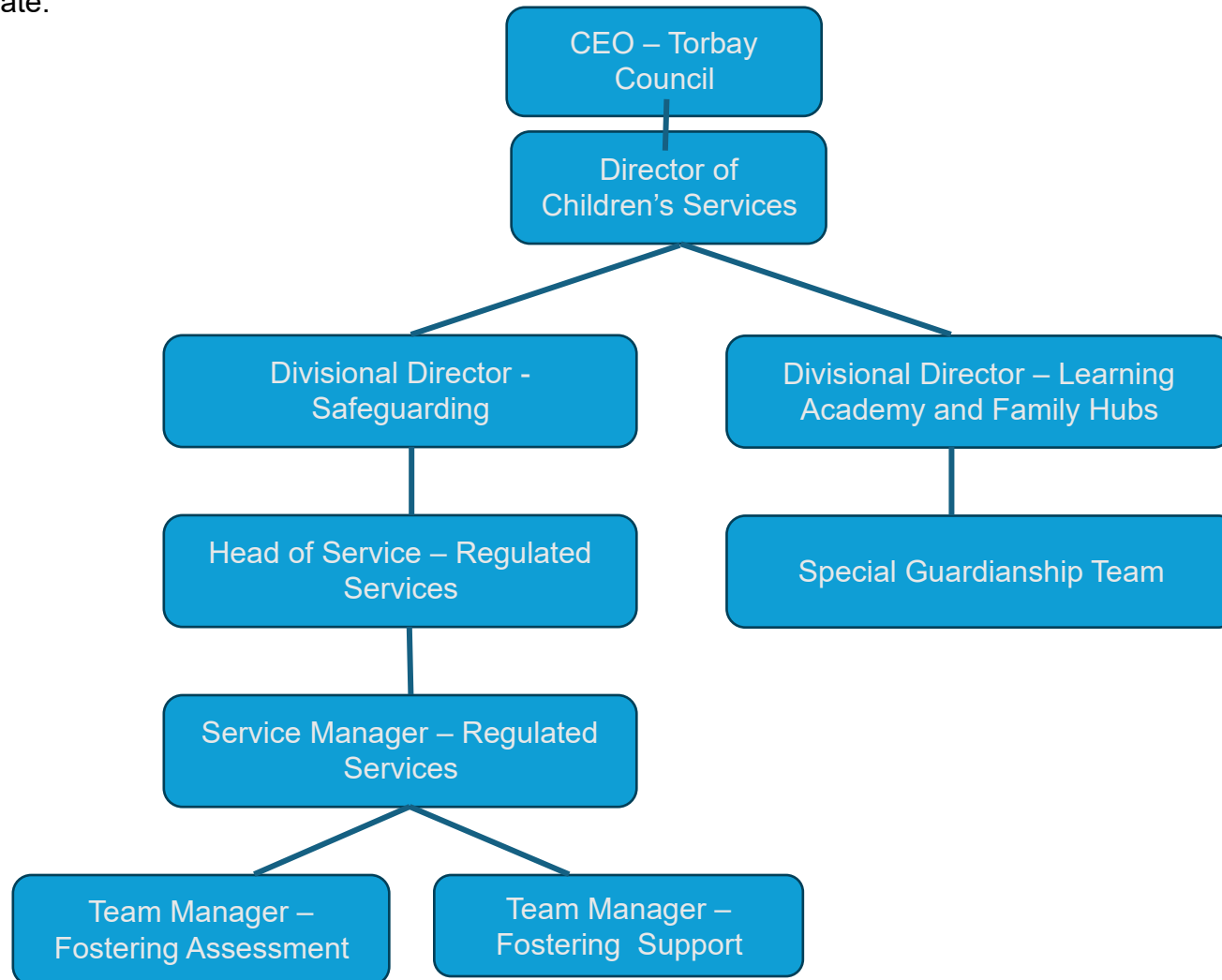
All our foster carers are supervised and supported by social workers within the fostering service and this also includes our Connected Carers who are afforded opportunities to engage in training and support alongside other foster carers to ensure their support. The overall aim of the Fostering Service is to provide a range of high quality, safe and aspirational foster care placements that meet the array of needs of Torbay cared for children.

**Torbay Fostering Service's objectives for service provision are:**

- We want cared for children to live in an environment which is warm, stable and consistent to meet their needs.
- We want cared for children to have access to fostering homes which provide a safe, secure and nurturing base from which they grow into confident and happy young people who have aspirations for their future.
- We want cared for children to feel supported to achieve the best possible outcomes, not only in the short term but in the medium to long term too.
- We want cared for children to feel fully involved in their planning.
- We want cared for children to feel like they have a voice in the development of services designed to support them.
- We want social workers to understand the value of the fostering role and how their actions and practice can support the delivery of high quality fostering services.
- We want to provide social workers with the relevant training and development opportunities to help them to under this.
- We want to provide fostering families with high quality and individualised training and development opportunities.
- We want to provide support of our fostering families which is personalised and inclusive of appropriate support for out of hours response.
- We want to continue to recruit fostering families who have a wide range of skills and experience, who can offer homes to a wider range of cared for children, including sibling groups, older children or those children who may have additional needs.
- We want to continue to recruit fostering families from a diverse background who can offer a range of homes for cared for children, thereby enhancing the quality of the matching process.
- We want to be a service which demonstrates its core values of equality and the value of diversity through its operational actions as well as its strategic review of practice, policy, training and development.
- We want to be a service which is compliant with the statutory, regulatory and legislative framework under which we work within daily.
- We want to be a service which recognises learning opportunities and ensures that service delivery is robustly monitored, reviewed and developed.
- We want to develop a team approach, which centres on the child and their needs, and which ensures that all involved in supporting a child are focused on the achievement of best practice.

## 5. Organisational Structure

Torbay Fostering Service is based at Children's Services, Tor Hill House in Torquay, and sits under Regulated Services. The Fostering Service consists of two teams: Fostering Assessment and Fostering Support. The governance structure is as follows, with the service sitting within the Safeguarding directorate:



Day-to day management and development of services is overseen by the two Team Managers, who are both social work qualified managers with experience in social work with children and families. Both Team Managers oversee a team of staff, inclusive of fostering assessment social workers, fostering supervising social workers, Community Care Workers, business support officers and a Recruitment and Events Co-Ordinator to support the delivery of service. Operational delivery is overseen by the Head of Service for Regulated Services, supported by the Divisional Director of Safeguarding.

Our Fostering Assessment Team focuses on recruitment activity, assessments of prospective foster carers and support for prospective fostering families going through the Panel approval process. They also deliver the pre-approval 'Skills to Foster' training programme offered to adult applicants and a specially created workshop for their children to attend to support the development of skills through the assessment process.

The Recruitment and Events Co-Ordinator role is an officer who works closely with the Fostering Assessment Team Manager, Communications team and other professionals to understand our local demographic and support them to view the potential skills people may have for fostering, thereby contributing to the development of a wider range of fostering families and skillsets.

Our Fostering Support team focuses on the support and supervision offered to approved foster carers, support through the Annual Review process, ongoing or updating assessments and investigations, participation and feedback work, training and development and the implementation of support groups and other celebratory and collective opportunities for our cared for children and their fostering families.

Torbay has its own Fostering Panel that meets regularly to make recommendations for the approval of foster carer candidates as well as to receive reviews of approval. The panel also consider other matters that are brought to them by the social work team. The panel is independent and has a chair and co-chair to sit alongside members to enable the function of the panel. In addition to the panel membership, our Placements Auditor sits on the panel to provide a Quality Assurance lens to our preparations, reports and presentation are to the highest standard. The panel is supported by a panel advisor who provides expert advice to the panel on arising matter.

Torbay Children's Services also has its own Learning Academy and works with a number of Universities to offer social work placements for students as well as offering a robust and supportive programme for Newly Qualified Social Workers employed by Torbay, some of whom may work within the Fostering Service and contribute to the service offer to our families.

All the Managers and Supervising or Assessing Social Workers hold social work qualifications and are registered with the Social Work England.

All staff working at Torbay have access to a wide range of continued professional development and training opportunities which are coordinated and promoted by our Learning Academy.

**The social work staff establishment on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024 comprised of:**

- Two permanent Team Managers
- Two permanent Assistant Team Managers
- Three full time social workers (Fostering Support)
- Four part time social workers (Fostering support)
- Four assessing social workers full-time (Fostering Assessment)
- Two part time Social workers (Fostering Assessment)
- One Community Care Worker providing services across the fostering service.
- One Recruitment, Retention and Events Co-Ordinator
- One Fostering Panel Chair and one vice chair
- Fostering Panel members
- Fostering Panel Advisor (this role is undertaken by the two team managers).



## 6. Fostering Recruitment Performance

During 2023/2024 the fostering service received a total of 65 initial enquiries, and as a result of these enquiries 4 mainstream fostering households were approved. This is a reduction of 50% compared to last year.

Years	Number of enquiries	Approvals	Conversion
2014- 2015	118	29	24%
2015- 2016	65	10	15%
2016- 2017	42	3	7%
2017 - 2018	86	10	12%
2018 - 2019	45	4	9%
2019 - 2020	51	2	4%
2020 - 2021	111	20	18%
2021 – 2022	99	9	9%
2022 – 2023	111	8	7%
<b>2023 - 2024</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6%</b>

The conversion of enquiries to approval during 2023/24 has decreased by 1% from 7% in 2022/2023 to 6%.

As a baseline expectation, the Fostering Service aim to increase the net number of fostering households by a minimum of ten per year. As of the 31st March 2024, Torbay supported 80 mainstream fostering families and approved only four families in the 2023-24 financial year. There were a total of 9 families that left fostering due to personal circumstances including retirement. Therefore, the current mainstream net total number of fostering families decreased by five in Torbay in 2023-24, with significant under-performance in the area of recruitment against our local target.

There are a number of factors which have impacted upon this performance. Factors such as the cost of living and individual financial considerations continue to be cited by both prospective and current fostering families as influencing factors when making the decision to begin to or continue to foster. Nationally, sufficiency and recruitment continues to be a challenge and a number of government led initiatives, aligned to the ambition of Stable Homes Built on Love, are being implemented to address this. Despite increasing event activity by up to 36% in terms of attendance at events and fostering drop-in sessions, only 65 initial enquiries were received in 2023-25; typically, only one in ten initial enquiries will convert into approvals, and therefore the lower generation of enquiries has had a direct impact on the number of fostering families who have been recruited in this financial year.

Eleven applicants progressed from the point of Initial Enquiry to the stage whereby they were allocated a social worker and the form F assessment had begun, however they subsequently withdrew or were withdrawn. This is a lower number than the previous year with the breakdown as below:

Withdrawn in Assessment	0
Management Decision	3
Due to family circumstances	5
Due to health concerns	2
No contact	1
Went to IFA	0
Total:	11

There were a total of 34 prospective applicants who withdrew having made an initial enquiry. The majority of this number comprises of applicants who did not contact us again or who did not respond to our attempts to contact them. There were four prospective applicants who withdrew after a positive Initial Visit. One couple decided to remain with their IFA, and the remaining applicants were unavailable.

There were a total of 12 Initial Visits which had a negative outcome, with the majority of these not having enough relevant experience or transferable skills to foster. When this is the case, we support with opportunities to gain experience with children, including opportunities within Torbay's Enabling

Service and at South Devon College. We also offer opportunities to link in with current Torbay foster carer mentors, who can share experiences with them and give them first hand testimony. We also signpost to free on-line courses to gain valuable insight into the lives of children who have experienced trauma. Other factors included lack of physical space that could not be resolved, and single carers who upon further investigation did not have the capacity to care for another child alongside their own.

The fostering service is however also responsible for the assessment and supported of connected kinship carers and prospective Special Guardians. The proportion ceasing to be cared for due to a Special Guardianship Order being granted in 2023-24 was in line with the national figure, at 14% compared to 13% nationally. The majority of SGOs made in 2023/24 made were to connected people (17 out of 24), however there were still six children who had Special Guardianship Orders made to previous foster carers who were not family or friends. Overall, this demonstrates a positive picture for cared for children in terms of permanency within a forever family during childhood.

In the year 2023/24, the fostering assessment team undertook a total of 73 Connected Carer and Special Guardianship assessments to explore the viability of permanence through Kinship Care. This is a significant increase from the previous year which saw 40 such assessments completed. As of the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, 16 Cared for children were living with Connected carers under Regulation 24 arrangements on a temporary basis pending the outcome of approval at fostering panel and with permanence plans for a Special Guardianship arrangement.

**Numbers of Foster Carers (as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024):**

As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, the total number of approved fostering households was 80 which is comprised as follows:

<b>Total Beds</b>	150
<b>Current Placements</b>	102 (inclusive of 14 Staying Put)
<b>Vacancies</b>	7
<b>Respite Beds</b>	17
<b>Voids</b>	24

In March 2024, the total number of approved fostering households was 80. This is a decrease of five mainstream carers from the 85 as of the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023.

Throughout 2023/2024 financial year there have been **0** cases through the Independent Review Mechanism process.

From 1st of April 2023 to 31st of March 2024, 12 fostering families were deregistered of which 9 were mainstream fostering families for the reasons as outlined below:

**Mainstream Foster Carers**

- Five were personal reasons around family circumstances.
- One due to ill health.
- One due to lack of availability concerns.
- One carer adopted their foster child.
- One carer was deregistered due to concerns.
- One death of foster carer.

**Connected Foster Carers**

- Two were awarded SGOs.

## 7. Recruitment and Marketing Strategy and Campaign

Fostering recruitment remains a key strategic focus within Regulated Services. Whilst continuing to recognize the immense skill and expertise contained within our current fostering family cohort, there is an ongoing need to expand the placement sufficiency and variety we are able to offer our cared for children. Whilst the number of cared for children continues to decrease overall, the needs of cared for children do not and there is specifically a need to develop our in-house ability to provide placement options for: older children; children with additional needs; children with complex needs; young people bridging out of residential provisions; unaccompanied asylum seeking children; sibling groups.

Torbay's aim is to increase our fostering family cohort by a net increase of ten new fostering families per year, to ensure that we have sufficient, local in-house provision to meet the needs of all of our children; the Strategy incorporates a profile of our cared for children, and their evolving needs (for example the increased need for fostering families who can support Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children). When considering an increase nationally in foster carer resignation, the drive and focus on increasing our in-house provision must continue. The Fostering Network have undertaken research which indicates that for every ten initial enquiries, only one will convert to an approval. On this basis, and in line with Torbay's target, we will need to generate 100 enquiries at minimum per year.

In the year 2023/24, an analysis of the recruitment and marketing activity evidenced that the majority of interest is created via a staff presence at activity and information sessions, which are advertised via the website and social media platforms. Having a face-to-face discussion is then prompting people to make online enquiries. Information sharing sessions are also a critical means of establishing an initial contact with prospective foster carers, and building relationships with them from the outset of their fostering journey. Insight analysis demonstrates that those a high proportion of prospective foster carers who make initial enquiries are those who have come into contact with the fostering service, either through first or second-hand experience of being a foster child or knowing someone who has fostered. As such, there is great power within social media campaigns for example in providing insights into being a foster carer, for those who already foster for Torbay.

On July 1st 2024, it is anticipated that Torbay's updated website, and social media campaign will be going live.

As from April 2024, there will be the introduction of a new regional fostering recruitment support hub for the South west. The regional hub is called Fostering South West and covers all local authorities. The new hub will work to improve the customer journey for prospective foster carers from initial enquiry through to applications. The aim is to help increase the conversion rate between initial enquiry and application.

The regional support hub will be a centrally run front door across our regional local authority cluster and will act as the first point of contact for prospective carers making an enquiry. Once processed through the hub each local authority will pick up the enquiries and ensure the prospective foster carers have the information and support, they need. Fostering South West will continue to provide increased levels of support and share resources for the benefit of children and fostering families. The new approach will provide an efficient approach particularly in the early

stages of prospective foster carers finding out information. The regional hub will build on and enhance the good work already being created by individual local authorities. The hub will support prospective applicants through their assessment process with their local authority and offer opportunities for additional learning, support and guidance to help in preparing them in their transition to become a foster carer with the purpose of increasing the number of applicants being approved to become foster carers.

The Fostering Recruitment Strategy outlines the following three year plan moving forward:

<b>Month/Year</b>	<b>Targeted Marketing Activity</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Policy or procedure changes</b>
April 2022 – March 2025	Offering our Foster Carers Refer a Friend incentive	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>April 2022 – advised Foster Carers of the new incentive. Refer an Applicant Scheme now launched which will provide a £250 one-off payment to any existing foster carer who refers a fostering applicant, at the point the applicant is approved and accepts their first placement. This has already generated three high quality initial enquiries.</li> </ul>
April 2024	Fostering South West goes live	Ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Links to Fostering South West to be included on all Torbay marketing material.</li> </ul>
By July 2024	Update of the Fostering section on the Torbay Council Website and linked to the Family Hubs website. The update will be including up to date events, incentives, and restorative language.	Reviewed every three months	Fostering Service Manager, Fostering Retention, Recruitment & Events Coordinator to work with Torbay Council Web Team to update the current website and Family Hubs website.

June 2023 – September 2023	Consult with fostering families on the enhancement of the Family Hubs website, to ensure this is a one stop shop for fostering families in Torbay in terms of signposting, advice and guidance.	Reviewed every three months	Fostering Service Manager, Fostering Retention, Recruitment & Events Coordinator to work with Family Hubs lead to update the website.
March 2022 – ongoing	Weekly social media posts to promote Fostering with Torbay Council.	Weekly	A procedure for requesting for regular social media posts to be added needs to be created and implemented.
March 2023- Sept 2024	Developing the resilience of our fostering panel and panel advisors by a recruitment campaign to support development of panel membership and targeted training for Panel advisor role – lead by Fostering Service Manager.	One off	
Aug 2022 – ongoing	Running of Fostering Information Sessions on a monthly basis. This will be via Teams on an ad hoc basis if required.	Monthly	A new PowerPoint to be created and used during Information Sessions and the same information can be sent to all applicants awaiting an initial visit.
May 2023, 2024 and 2025	Childrens Services and Fostering Celebration Event. This is to be run on or around Foster Carer Fortnight.	Annually	
March 2023, 2024 and 2025	Foster Carer Workshop with Childrens Services Management, Chief Executive, councillors, and Foster Carers	Annually	
March 2023 onwards	Skills for Fostering training for new applicants	Monthly  As and when	New training has been created and a new procedure has also been created and shared with the fostering assessment team and managers.

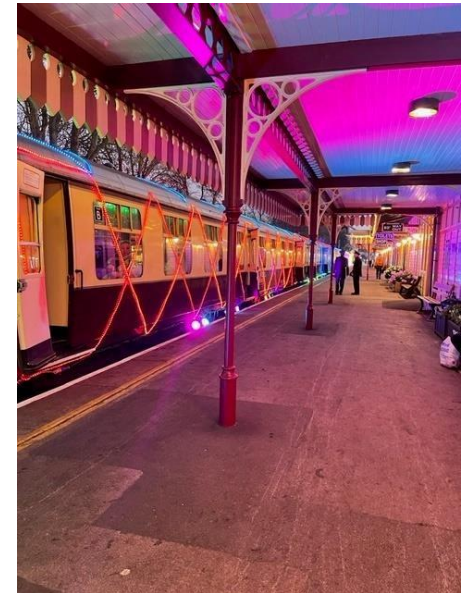
	Birth children Skills for Fostering training to be undertaken during assessment.		
April 2023 onwards	Fostering Forums to be held at minimum quarterly and face to face.	Every three months	
March 2025	Implementation of Mockingbird first constellation.	Work ongoing.	Key policies and protocols are in progress.



## 8. Events

The Torbay Fostering Service have, as part of ongoing recruitment activity and the developed Corporate Parenting Offer, been able to attend and participate in the following 45 events in the year 2023-24

- Armed Forces Day
- Childrens Week
- Torquay United Event
- Lions Club Community Day
- Kings Coronation event
- Paignton/Torquay/Brixham town centres
- Paignton/ Torquay/Brixham/Newton Abbot/Churston Libraries
- Oldway Primary school summer fete
- Galmpton Gooseberry Pie Fayre
- Career Fayre – Torquay
- Torbay Pride
- South Devon College Careers event
- Totnes Christmas markets
- Torquay town hall – Fostering Friendly event.
- Celebration event for staff and carers



In 2024/25, we have 70 planned events that we will be attending and providing a platform to promote our fostering service. These events will have representation from our fostering team and other staff members; in addition, current foster carers that have committed to support these events and share their experiences of being a foster carer with Torbay. The events have increased by 36% and therefore there has been a greater presence of the fostering campaign in and around Torbay.

## 9. Foster carer support

### Performance

Torbay Fostering Service aim to provide the best possible care for children and maintain high standards in respect of children's care. In order to ensure that this is consistently achieved, Torbay have rigorous and comprehensive quality assurance frameworks in place, with audit activity across Children's Services taking place regularly.

The Fostering Service routinely provides reports in respect of the profile of the cared for children cohort and their placement types, information relating to vacancies and investigations, recruitment activity and performance, staffing considerations, training and development, service outcomes and aims and any other information relating to the performance of the service and the wellbeing of our fostering families and our cared for children.

Themes and patterns arising from Fostering Panels are tracked and monitored, with specific actions arising from any consistent areas for development. Compliance with policies and procedures is monitored by managers in supervision and audit and dip sample activity. All staff receive regular supervision, the frequency agreed according to their role, experience and need.

The performance of the service is also monitored within our regulatory framework, and by the Corporate Parenting Board, the Overview and Scrutiny Board, the Continuous Children's Improvement Board and the senior leadership team.

### Areas of key quality assurance focus for the Torbay Fostering Service are:

- \*The numbers of cared for children, in relation to their plan of permanence.
- \*Placement stability, with a key focus on minimising disruption for cared for children and enhancing placement stability which involves monitoring the number of placement changes for cared for children.
- \*Placement sufficiency and the recruitment of new fostering families.
- \*Compliance, including foster carer training, DBC checks, timely Annual Reviews and fulfilment of basic training requirements. \*Timely and quality foster carer supervision.
- \*Purposeful and comprehensive placement planning meetings.
- \*The use of placement support and stability meetings.
- \*The timeliness and impact of unannounced visits.

The Fostering Service have consistently sustained good performance in the four Key Performance indicators.

Fostering performance as of the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024 stands at:

Foster carers with up-to-date training – 64%

Foster carers with up-to-date DBS – 100%

Foster carers with up-to-date medical – 98%

Foster carers with up-to-date Annual Review – 87%

The percentage of foster carers post one year who have completed the minimum (TSD) training has decreased from 89% to 65% in February 2024. This decrease relates to newly approved carers in the last two years. One significant change which appears to have had an impact the transition of this training to the central iLearn system. Some newly approved foster carers and Connected Carers have cited issues in finding the time to complete training due to work and fostering commitments and the fostering service are providing high levels of support to these carers to ensure they have protected time to complete the work, with each relevant fostering family having a bespoke session booked with them to provide support.

Performance against these key indicators is a regular focus of the monthly performance surgeries chaired by the Head of Service, Regulated Services.

## **Support Groups**

Torbay Fostering Service also run a number of support groups, which are organised at various times throughout the year and through various platforms. Torbay are committed to learning from feedback and participation and are constantly looking for ways in which we can make our training as accessible and purposeful and meaningful for fostering families as possible.

It is intended that support groups provide an opportunity for fostering families to meet with each other and share their views and experiences of fostering; in addition, fostering families can access support, guidance and signposting through these groups, and receive information about recent changes to policies and guidance and practice.

Currently, Torbay Fostering Service offer:

- A support group run by CAMHS which offers support through a therapeutic lens.
- Special Guardianship Support group for all Special Guardians receiving support from the Special Guardianship Team.
- A general foster carer support groups which is held monthly face-to-face.
- Foster Carer Forums which are held quarterly.
- Evening support groups and Connected Carer support groups.

- Single foster carers support group.
- Evening support groups.

Foster carers receive financial allowances which value and respect their skills, learning and commitment. Detailed financial information and guidance around expectations are made available to each foster carer. In addition to the financial support, our foster carers benefit from local discounts and offers from providers that have made a commitment to support Torbay's foster care families as part of the Corporate Parenting Offer. Paignton Zoo have made a pledge to provide all of our foster carers an annual family pass in addition to other local attractions providing discounted rates to access to foster carers.

### **Out of hours support**

Torbay Fostering Service currently also have access to an out of hours team which offers direct support to fostering families whereby issues in relation to placement instability have been identified; this is operating through our Building Futures team and provides a weekly response until 9pm weekdays and a service on weekends 10-6pm Saturdays. In addition, the EDS (Emergency Duty Service) provides advice and support 24 hours, 7 days a week. This is a generic service and will provide a duty response in the event of an emergency.

### **Support during Allegations**

Torbay Fostering Service also commission specialist support, for example mediation or advocacy services, in situations whereby this is required for foster carers through the allegation process. Fostering Service commissions, the independent individual support for foster carers from Fostering Network to support them through the investigation process.

### **Training**

At Torbay, we believe that every moment of the fostering experience provides rich opportunity for learning and development; we are committed to supporting fostering families to grow and learn and develop their practice and recognise that this will be on an individualised basis, with at times a bespoke training need.

Fostering families begin their training journey during the assessment and approval process and build on this learning as they move on to complete the Training, Support and Development Standards. Fostering families receive a full induction, in order to enable them to understand the expectations of the fostering role, the key principles and values which underpin the fostering role and how they can best meet the needs of the cared for children they may be supporting and caring for.

**Foster Carer training includes:**

Record Keeping for Foster Carers  
Safer Caring  
LADO Role and Allegations Against Foster Carers  
SGO PACE Training  
Delegated Authority for Foster Carers  
Paediatric First Aid  
Life Story Work  
Introduction to attachment theory and practice  
Grief, Loss and Change  
Family Time Supervision  
Bridging to Adoption  
Fostering Changes Training  
PACE Training  
Skills to foster (as part of the assessment)

In certain circumstances, Torbay Fostering Service will explore alternative types of bespoke training for individual or groups of fostering families, where this is an identified need.

Torbay foster carers have been able to access relationship and sexual health training led by health in 2023-24.

## 10. Special Guardianship Support

As of March 2019, all Special Guardianship assessments and Special Guardianship Support has been held within the Fostering Service. In December 2023, Special Guardianship Support moved to Family Hubs and since this time there has been a joined-up approach between Special Guardianship Support and Regulated Services.

The following staff make up the Special Guardianship Support team:

1 Team Manager – FTE 1 fixed term since January 2024 (with oversight for Special Guardianship Support and Breathing Space Service)

3 Community Care Workers

- Full time – FTE 1 fixed term since May 2024
- 4 days – FTE 0.8 permanent
- 4 days – FTE 0.82 permanent \*absent due to sickness since January 2024

All Special Guardianship Order assessments are undertaken by social workers within the Fostering Assessment Team; all support for children subject to these Orders and their families is coordinated through the Special Guardianship Support team. Referral routes, roles and responsibilities in relation to Special Guardianship Support are currently being reviewed in light of 'Championing Kinship Care; the national kinship care strategy' (DofE, 2023) and 'Kinship Care: statutory guidance for local authorities' (DofE, 2024) \*pending publication.

A flowchart outlining social work responsibility in respect of Special Guardianship support plans, how these are recorded and the recording of communication of this to applicants. This has been communicated to all teams across Children's Services.

Information leaflets for assessment and support are in use by both the Fostering Assessment and Support teams. Consultation was offered by legal services in the creation of these leaflets.

A Special Guardianship Order tracker is being maintained, to include all those children subject to the Order, the status of the support being offered to them and the dates for review of the Special Guardianship Support plan. Additional reporting capabilities are also expected through Liquid Logic pending a review of the Special Guardianship pathways open for our Special Guardians. This will include trigger dates for the children at the age of fifteen years and six months, which will then prompt a letter explaining their rights to access from the Care Experience service.

Each Special Guardianship Support plan is then reviewed annually, in line with the month the Order was made, and a letter is sent to every Special Guardian at this point, outlining the support available to them, information in respect of our Family Hubs and our Family First support leaflet. For

those Special Guardians receiving active support from the team, more frequent reviews of the Special Guardianship Support plan are undertaken in line with the child, Special Guardian, and family need.

Special Guardianship Support team have completed 22 Adoption and Special Guardianship Support applications between April 2023 – March 2024.

An internal Special Guardianship Support working group was initiated in January 2024 in order to consider the support needs of our SGO children and Special Guardians. The working group has considered the findings of a survey completed by 15 Special Guardians and begun work on improving areas of support that Special Guardians have told us matter to them. Some priorities for the working group have been on hold pending publication of new Kinship Care statutory guidance and associated anticipated Kinship local offer.

Key priorities for Special Guardianship Support 2024 – 2025:

- Reimplementing local support group – this is now up and running monthly with positive engagement from Special Guardians. Additional national support groups will be available via ‘Kinship’.
- Quarterly Special Guardianship events/activities – this is up and running with a successful Easter event held at Paignton Zoo. Planning for 2x summer events is underway and a further event will take place at Christmas.
- Updating Special Guardianship Support Offer – this action will be replaced by the anticipated Kinship local offer.
- Kinship information page for Family Hubs website – this is being developed and subject to publication of statutory guidance.
- Quarterly Kinship Support Newsletter to be sent out to all Special Guardians and added to Family Hubs Kinship information page – this is being developed with the first newsletter anticipated July 2024.
- Training programme for Special Guardians – this requires finalising subject to partnership meeting with ‘Kinship’ Network Development Officer in June 2024.
- Kinship Information packs – not yet actioned.
- Annual Special Guardianship survey provides means of consultation – survey completed in January 2024, further survey planned for January 2025.
- Updated systemic process for Special Guardianship assessment and support – this has begun to be considered and is subject to statutory guidance.

In conjunction with the Learning Academy and the charity, ‘Kinship’, Special Guardians will have access to specific training opportunities and also benefit from our growing Corporate Parenting Offer. In addition, Special Guardianship support groups are in place, and we will look to develop this over the next year and also through Torbay’s ongoing Family Hub implementation.

## 11. Key Priorities and Actions of the Service in 2024/25

- Embed the Stable Homes Built on Love reforms including strengthening our offer to those children in a kinship arrangement.
- Strengthen the process of reunification with timely reviews and assessments to inform good quality planning.
- Relaunch the fostering website and associated branding with communications, and links to both Fostering South West and the Torbay Family Hubs website.
- Make the fostering brand recognised and effective and linked in with the Fostering Hub.
- Progress a community of foster carers for our children in Torbay within a Mockingbird community 'constellation' and continue to work with the Fostering Network.
- Embed the new process of the Fostering Hub and readiness for increased enquiries.
- A review of the Fostering Contract will be finalized, to support a relevant and up to date response to our inhouse fostering carers.
- Ongoing consultation with foster carers will take place over this year via thematic surveys looking at specific topic such as their participation within the professional groups working with the children, training and development, support systems within the inhouse fostering, developing back up carers and use of enablers and other support services.
- Continued development of our offer of Parent and Child placements, with a clear support and assessment plan.
- Whilst the number of cared for children reduces, there remains a vital need for greater variety in respect of the nature of in-house placements on offer to our cared for children, particular our older children, our sibling groups and our children who have additional or more complex needs. As such, recruitment must and does remain a key priority.
- Continue to implement the Former Foster Carer SGO Offer and secure Special Guardianship Orders in respect of identified children who could achieve enhanced permanence through this option.
- Increasing the numbers of cared for children engaged in the Cared for Council.

<b>Report authored by:</b>	<b>Colin Schumacher (Head of Service), Lucy Reeves and Gina Powell (Service Managers)</b>
<b>Date:</b>	<b>24<sup>th</sup> May 2024</b>
<b>Date of Review:</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> April 2025</b>



