

**Children's Services**  
**Proposal to Develop Fostering Services on a Regional Basis**

**1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

To secure in principle agreement to explore the development of fostering services on a regional basis using the geographical footprint of the South East Wales Regional Partnership Board.

To agree for future proposals to be considered through a detailed options paper and project plan.

**2. LINK TO CORPORATE STRATEGIES**

Corporate Plan 2017 – 2022

**3. SUMMARY**

This Report outlines the proposal to explore the development of fostering services on a regional basis underpinned by the messages from the work of the National Fostering Framework and a regional case for change.

**4. BACKGROUND**

In many ways, foster care is public care at its best. Foster carers have a beneficial impact upon many of the vulnerable children and young people who are looked after by local authorities. The central aim in establishing regional fostering services is to ensure that the best quality foster care placements are available to all the children and young people who need them in order to reach their full potential and that foster carers are valued, supported and receive excellent training.

The majority of children who are looked after are cared for by foster carers. In 2015 /16 across Wales 76.1% of children who were looked after were cared for by foster carers. On a regional basis we mirror the national picture with 76.3% of our children being cared for by foster carers.

While some children are cared for by family members under a fostering arrangement, kinship foster carers are not a significant proportion of the foster carer population. Across Wales in 2015 /16 children being cared for under these arrangements made up 21.1% of all children with foster carers and on a regional basis the percentage was slightly lower at 18.5%.

Fostering service providers across Wales include public services, independent commercial providers and independent not for profit providers. In 2015/16 we had 64.1% of children with general foster carers cared for by public sector foster carers across Wales, while as a region we performed better with 72.4% of children being cared for by our own local authority foster carers.

While outcomes for children being cared for within independent sector fostering services have not been demonstrated to be any better than outcomes for children being cared for by local authority foster carers there is a higher likelihood of children having placements outside of the local authority boundary when commissioning independent sector placements. In 2015 / 16 across Wales 68.6% of the total number of children being cared for outside of local authority boundaries by general carers were with independent provider foster carers. On a regional basis 58.8% our children being cared for outside of local authority boundaries by general foster carers were with independent provider foster carers. Maintaining links with family and friends and local community and accessing education and health services is made all the more challenging when working across boundaries.

Since 2007 /08 across Wales local authority total spend on fostering services has increased by 20.7%. Much of the increase has come from the increased usage of the Independent Fostering Agencies. The table below demonstrates the comparative spend for Newport in 2016/17.

	In-house provision	Independent Fostering Agencies
Overall spend	£2,427,522	£1,388,018
Number of children	175	30
Average weekly cost	£259.01	£735.17

Recruitment and retention of local authority foster carers is essential to give children the opportunity to remain close to their family and community links and to provide a service that is value for money. Over the past 3 years statistics across Wales show a steady decline with the total number of foster carers approved reducing by 169 (6.5%) and the total number of places linked to approvals reducing by 196 (4.3%). On a regional basis over three years we have also had year on year decline of foster carer approvals with the total number of foster carers approved reducing by 29 (5.2%) resulting in the total number of places reducing by 79 (8.2%).

Welsh Government has recognised the challenges faced by public services fostering services by supporting the work of the National Fostering Framework as one of the four key work streams within the programme of the Strategic Steering Group set up with the task of 'Improving Outcomes for Children'. Phase One of the work involved an extensive consultation with fostering service providers, foster carers, children and young people and public sector partners on fostering services, identifying some of the challenges for fostering services and what opportunities we have to deliver services in a different way on a local, regional and national level. Phase One of the work also explored what performance and resource information we have available on fostering services to understand how we are performing and how we could improve the service we deliver. Work began on developing a National Fostering Performance and Resource Framework to be used by public service and independent fostering service providers. At the conclusion of phase one of the work of National Fostering Framework a report highlighted the messages from the consultation and made a

total of 10 recommendations to take work forward looking at national, regional and local arrangements for the functions of fostering services.

Phase Two of the work of the National Fostering Framework has focussed on seven of the recommendations, one of which was to develop a functional framework for national, regional and local delivery of fostering services and another was to pilot the national performance and resource framework for fostering services. All five local authorities for Gwent participated in the pilot of the national performance and resource framework for fostering services, which has put the region in a good position to be able to identify regional priorities for the development of fostering services. Development and implementation of a national performance and resource framework for fostering services is a priority for the National Fostering Framework which proposes using the regional partnership board geographical footprint plus the national performance and resource framework to identify priorities.

National Fostering Framework functional model proposes several elements of public services fostering which could be developed on a regional basis including:

- Marketing and recruitment of foster carers
- Pre and post approval training for foster carers
- Exchanging placements between local authorities
- Regional commissioning arrangements for foster placements
- Foster Carer Review documentation and process
- Regional Foster Panels
- Peer support for foster carers

## 5. **PRESENT POSITION**

Gwent Heads of Childrens Services have been pro-active in identifying opportunity for regional development informed by the functional model proposed by the National Fostering Framework.

Gwent Fostering Team Managers meet on a regular basis to progress work identified through joint meetings with Heads of Childrens Services.

Increased collaboration has resulted in the development of several regional initiatives which are being implemented which include:

- Development of a regional foster carer review document and process for completing reviews.
- Development and distribution of a regional Foster Carer Handbook.
- Working together to develop common policies in regard to When I am Ready arrangements and Protocol for Joint Working between Shared Lives and Fostering Services.
- Scoping exercises in regard to marketing and recruitment of foster carers, pre and post foster carer training and exchanging placements between local authorities.

6. **CONSULTATION**

During Phase One of the work of the National Fostering Framework there was extensive consultation with fostering services, foster carers, children and young people, public sector partners. Messages from this consultation have informed the recommendations in the Phase One report and the work streams identified, which have also informed the regional work of the fostering services in Gwent. The view is clear that there is a need for change.

The Fostering Network has published the results of their national survey of foster carers in 'The State of the Nation's Foster Care 2016' report. Many of the findings reflect the consultation by the National Fostering Framework especially in regard to access to training and consistency of practice.

Local consultation with foster carers and fostering teams has been ongoing while work has been undertaken developing the regional initiatives to date and changes have been made as a response to feedback.

The consultation across all stakeholders has welcomed the steps being taken towards change. All recognise there is a need to move towards an improved provision to address the emerging lack of placements and poor outcomes for children.

7. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Financial implications would be identified as part of the detailed project planning of the next stage.

8. **STAFFING IMPLICATIONS**

Staffing implications would be identified as part of the detailed project planning of the next stage.

9. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

These recommendations will be presented to Cabinet for decision and all future proposals will be returned for further discussion with Members:

*Members are requested to:*

- *Note the contents of this report and the link to Corporate Parenting.*
- *To endorse the proposal for the five local authorities of Gwent to continue to work in collaboration of the delivery regional fostering initiatives.*
- *To endorse the proposal for the exploration of the development of a regional fostering service.*
- *To agree for future proposals to be considered through a detailed options paper and project plan.*

## 10. **WELLBEING GOALS**

- A prosperous Wales
- A resilient Wales
- A healthier Wales
- A more equal Wales
- A Wales of cohesive communities
- A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language
- A globally responsible Wales

The proposal is clearly in line with the wellbeing goals for Wales. Effective fostering services will ensure the most vulnerable children are cared for safely. Strong placements will ensure access to positive educational opportunities and enriching activities for their childhoods thus ensuring they can reach their full potential.

In the Corporate Plan the Wellbeing Goals for Newport are:

1. To improve skills, educational outcomes & employment opportunities
2. To promote economic growth and regeneration whilst protecting the environment
3. To enable people to be healthy, independent & resilient
4. To build cohesive & sustainable communities

Developing regional fostering services will ensure for children and young people in Newport can fully access opportunities for education. They will be supported to access health services and cared for to grow into being resilient adults who are able to fully contribute to the City.

## 11. **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES**

- Long Term
- Prevention
- Integration
- Collaboration
- Involvement

The proposal is clearly in line with the sustainable development principles. Effective fostering services will ensure the most vulnerable children are cared for safely. Strong placements will ensure children receive appropriate care for the right time frame within their local communities and can be fully integrated with their friends and peers.