

ANNUAL FOSTERING SERVICE REPORT



2023/2024



Introduction

We are pleased to present the 2023/2024 annual report for Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council's Fostering Service. Our fostering service is committed to ensuring the highest standard of care for vulnerable children and young people. Tameside Council Fostering Service operates within the Fostering National Minimum Standards, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, which form the basis of the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 for the conduct of fostering services.

Tameside, like all local authorities nationally, has experienced increasing difficulty and pressure to maintain our sufficiency of placements whilst trying to reduce our use of expensive external fostering and residential provision, which is in short supply.

Whilst Tameside have not approved many foster carers during this reporting period this appears to be the trend nationally across the country. The annual Fostering in England statistics published by Fostering Network in November 2023 states that significantly more foster carers have chosen to leave the role this year compared to the number of new joiners. *"This highlights the huge pressures currently facing foster care and the urgent need for new foster carers. Numbers are continuing to decline against a backdrop of record numbers of children in need of fostering families"*. An example being that in 2022 – 2023 the 4,080 fostering households were approved while 5,130 households stopped fostering, seeing a loss of 1,050 fostering households.

Tameside recognises the need to improve both the recruitment and retention of foster carers to provide high quality family-based care for children and young people who are unable to live within their birth families.

Team comments:

Strengths of the fostering service from the team perspective

- Team strengths are our sense of humour, openness, realistic expectations of ourselves and others, fair in our assessments, approachable and experienced
- I believe a key strength in the team is that we all rally together to support each other through difficult times.
- I see the strength of the Fostering Team as comprising of a strong & committed workforce dedicated in making the required improvement journey with an experienced & effective senior management team. A great effort is being made to reach out & engage with our foster carers & to recruit new carers to meet our sufficiency targets.

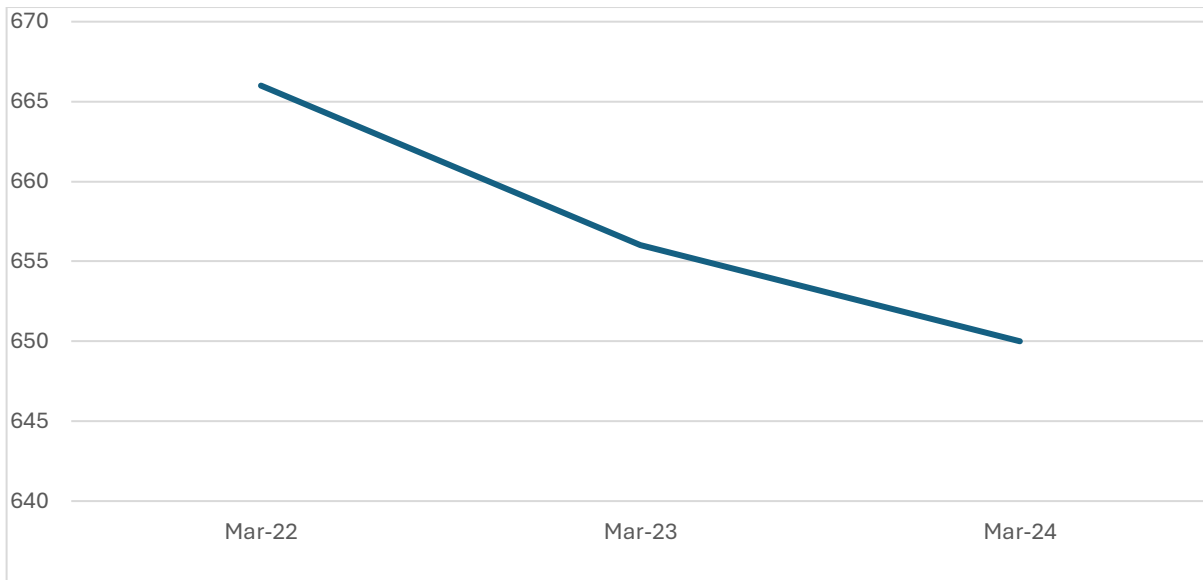
What staff feel they have done well in the past 12 months

- I have achieved a greater sense of confidence in my assessment skills and very proud of the relationship I have built with my carers and the team
- I have managed to build positive relationships with my carers and children and support them through challenges.

- I feel that we have come a long way in our improvement journey & that there is now a clearer & more detailed understanding of the regulation environment in which the service operates. I feel optimistic for the future of the service both for the service users & team members.

Staff in the fostering service work flexibly with three days either office based at Ashton Old Library or on visits and two days working from home. Staff have access to a shared office space with hot desks. It is positive that the Cared for Children's Team and Leaving Care Team are situated in the same building which should enhance positive working relationships. Tameside is regulated by Ofsted who inspect our service via regular ILACS inspections to evaluate the effectiveness to protect children and provide care services.

Tameside's Cared for Population

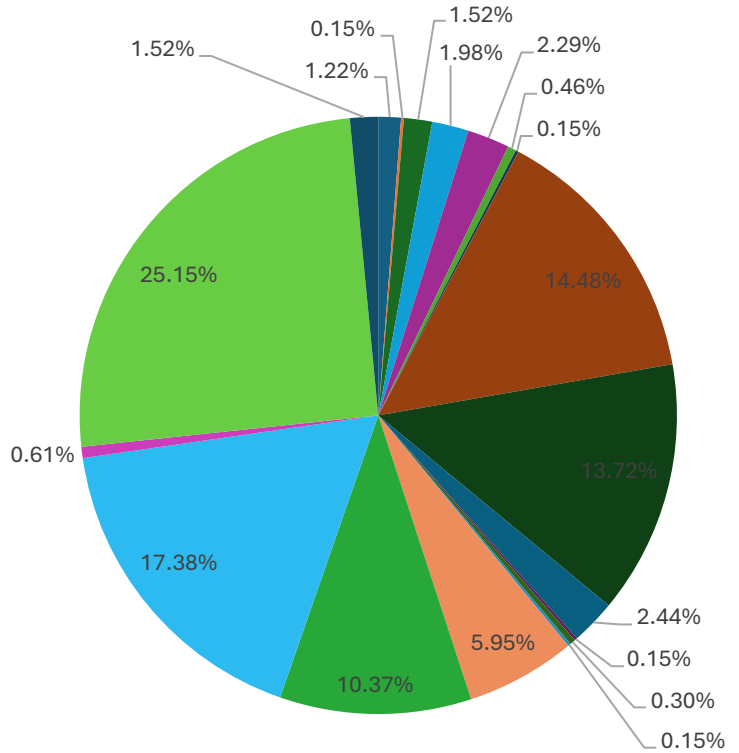


The above chart shows that in the last three years the number of children looked after in Tameside has remained relatively stable. There is a slight reduction in the number of cared for children and young people over this period from 666 at the end of March 2022 to 650 at the end of March 2024. This is a gradual reduction of 16 cared for children.

This pie chart below represents in percentages where children were placed at 31st March 2024.

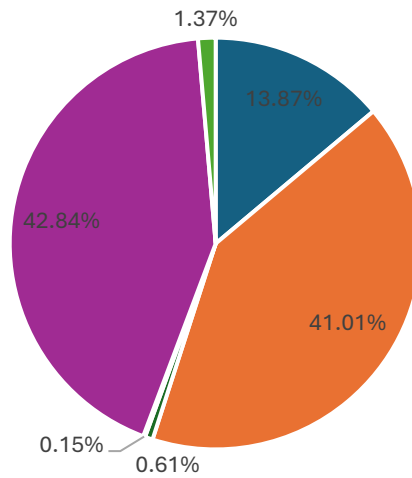
% by Placement types

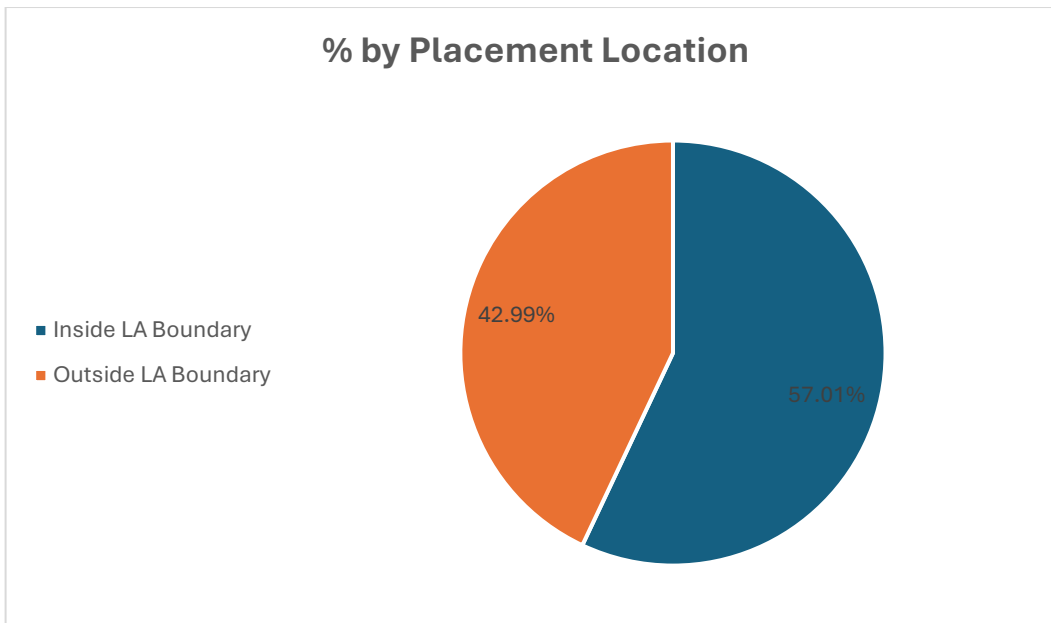
- 38(6) Assessment Order under the Children Act 1989
- A5 Placed For Adoption With Placement Order (under section 21 of the ACA, 2002) With Current Foster Carer
- A6 Placed For Adoption With Placement Order (under section 21 of the ACA, 2002) Not With Current Foster Carer
- H5 - Registered Provider of Supported Accommodation
- H5 Residential Accommodation Not Subject To Children's Homes Regulations
- H6 - Supported Lodgings
- K1 - Secure unit



% by Placement Provider

- PR0 - Parents or other person with parental responsibility
- PR1 - Own provision by LA
- PR2 - Other LA provision
- PR3 - Other public provision
- PR4 - Private Provision
- PR5 - Voluntary/Third Sector Provision





Placement Requests in this period

The systems in place during this reporting process to monitor placement searches were inadequate and lacked the necessary robustness to ensure effective oversight and timely intervention. However, this has been identified as a weakness in the service and is a priority for service improvement for 2024.

Tameside Fostering Service Structure

The staffing structure within the fostering service is hierarchical, with clearly defined reporting lines and accountability. The Head of Service has the fostering service as one of the services that they are responsible for. The Service Unit Manager is responsible for overseeing all functions and reports directly to the Head of Service who reports directly to the Assistant Director of Children's Services.

There are three team managers who report directly to the Service Unit Manager. Each team manager is responsible for a different aspect of fostering activity. The areas of activity are

- Recruitment and Assessment,
- Mainstream fostering support and supervision
- Connected persons assessment and support and supervision.

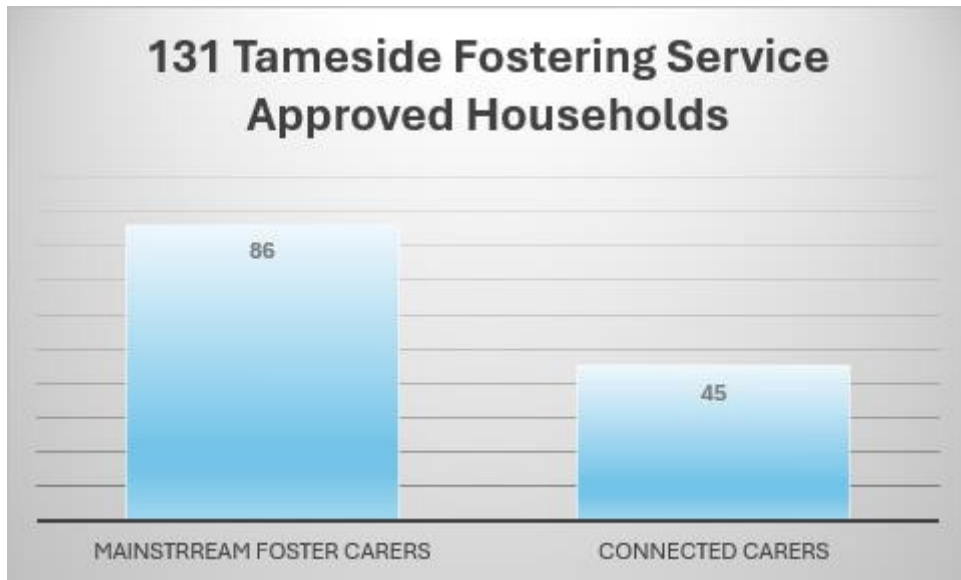
Each team manager has a senior practitioner to support them in their role. There are up to six supervising social workers in the mainstream support and supervision pod and the same for the connected persons pod. Currently there are 2.5 assessing social workers allocated to the Recruitment & Assessment Pod.

The staffing structure is designed to ensure clear accountability whilst also ensuring a positive collaboration across the teams that supports the organisations objectives.

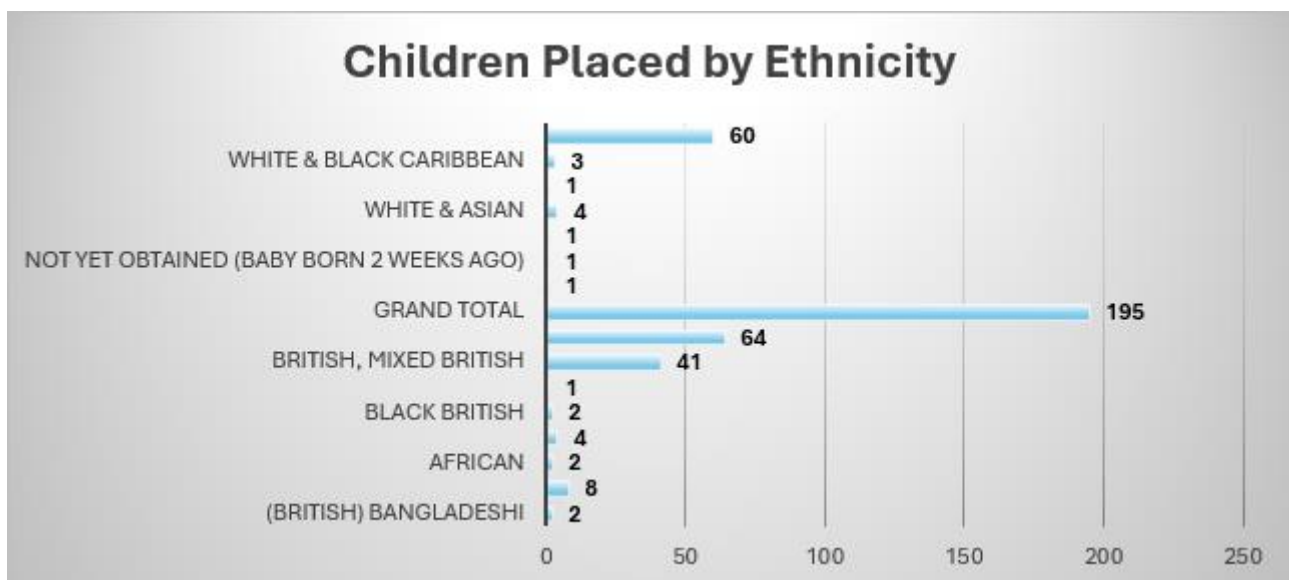
Foster Carers

At the time of reporting there were 131 approved fostering households.

The split is 86 mainstream foster carers and 45 connected carers who are approved for named children.



Tameside Foster carers were providing 195 placements to children on 31st March 24 with the following ethnicities.



Recruitment and Assessment pod (R & A)

The R & A pod cover a range of activities from the initial marketing and recruitment of foster carers to their assessment and approval at Panel. The pod works has started working more closely in collaboration with the Communications Department and focuses on marketing and communications. This year, the fostering service was rebranded, and talks have started in relation to the creation of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) Recruitment Hub. The GMCA recruitment is a DfE funded project aimed at bringing all ten authorities across Greater Manchester together to raise the profile of fostering.

The R & A pod delivers the Skills to Foster training, which runs throughout the year on evenings and weekends to ensure applicants who work or have evening commitments can attend. The training is a mandatory training designed to give prospective foster carers an introduction to fostering. The training is co-facilitated with experienced Tameside foster carers, this is an asset to the training and new applicants love to hear first-hand experiences from Tameside foster carers.

Assessing Social Workers start the journey with all new mainstream applicants, from initial visits through to training and the assessment sessions right up to fostering panel and ADM.

Enquiry	Initial Home Visit	Application	Skills to Foster	Assessment	Panel	ADM
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Recruitment Activity

There were limited recruitment events in 2023/2024. However, the team had been working to develop new resources and marketing materials used to promote fostering with Tameside.

A recruitment strategy has been developed which has 4 key objectives:

Objective 1 – To increase the number of in-house foster carers in Tameside

Objective 2 – To develop a wraparound support model for Foster Carers

Objective 3 – To reduce the number of Independent Fostering Agency Placements

Objective 4 – To improve our marketing approaches when reaching out to prospective foster carers

Recruitment enquiry data for the reporting period

Enquiries	144
Initial Home Visits	21
Applications received	7
Approvals	5

The low conversion rate from telephone enquiry to arranging a screening visit can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, many people make an enquiry to develop a little more understanding of what fostering is and secondly households in the very early stages of considering fostering are asking questions such as *'do I need a spare bedroom?'*

Twenty one households were identified as meeting the criteria for an initial screening visit. This is a visit to the home to both gain information to determine suitability to continue to the application stage. This is also an opportunity for people to ask questions to enable them to decide whether it is the right time for them to progress with an application. The conversion from initial home visit to applications received can be explained by either the visit not fully addressing their concerns or set expectations of the service ruling them out at this point due to issues that arise during the visit. The length and complexity of the assessment process can be discouraging, leading potential foster carers to disengage before the application stage.

Five mainstream fostering households were approved during this reporting period. There have also been 16 resignations/de-registrations in this period. This has resulted in a loss of 11 fostering households over the past year.

Recruitment Campaign images



Connected Persons Foster Carers Pod

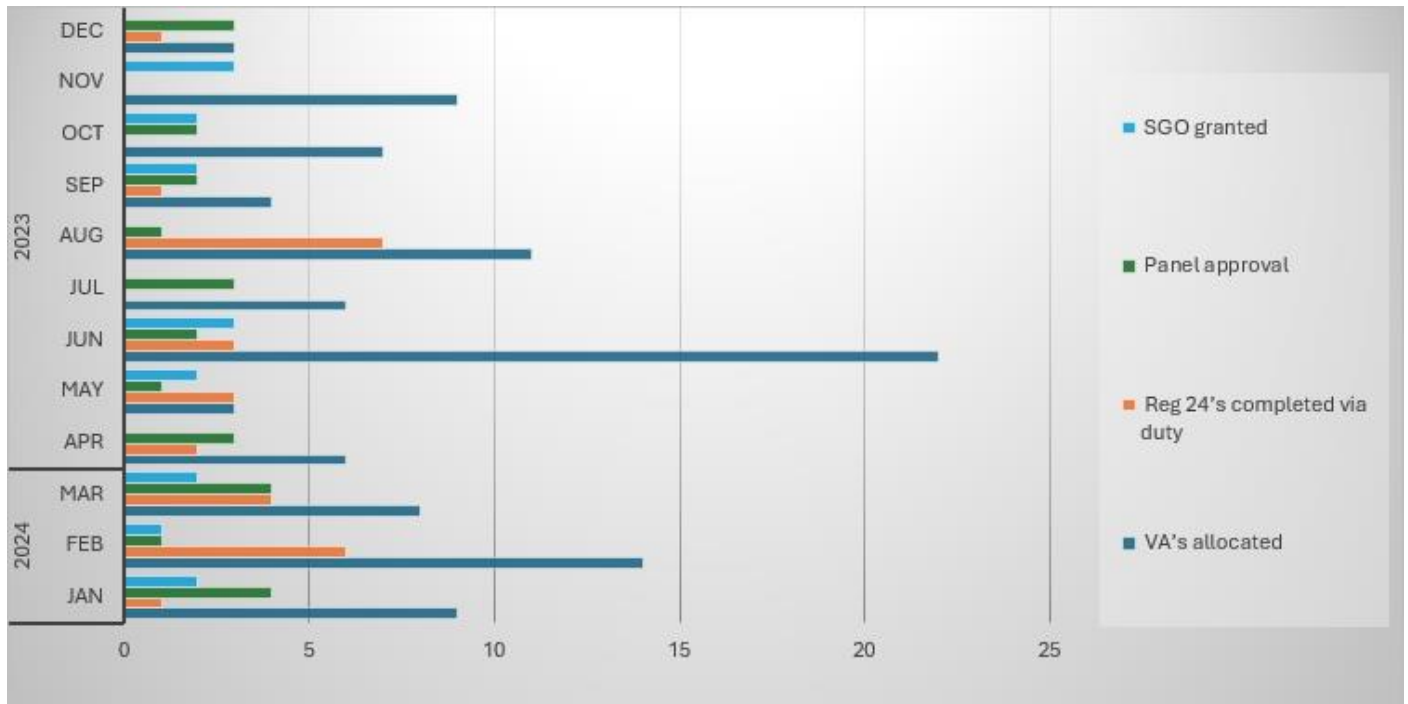
The connected persons pod undertakes all work associated with connected/kinship carers. This is when a child or young person is placed with an extended family member or person

connected with them. Prior to a placement a viability assessment should be undertaken to determine whether the prospective carer is able to offer a safe home whilst a full assessment is undertaken and presented to the fostering panel. If a child or young person is placed or is planned to be placed prior to a full assessment being undertaken a Reg 24 assessment is completed. The decision maker for Reg 24's and viability assessments is the Fostering ADM (Agency Decision Maker).

The connected carers pod completed 102 viability assessments. A viability assessment is an initial evaluation to determine whether a relative or someone with a pre-existing connection to a child is a suitable candidate to care for the child. This is typically the first step in assessing whether the individual can become a foster carer for the child they are connected to. 28 Reg 24 assessments of potential connected foster carers were carried out between April 1st 2023 and March 31st 2024, to determine the possibility of children and young people remaining within their extended family. This has led to the completion of 25 fully approved connected carer assessments being presented to the fostering panel in the same period. During this period 17 Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) have been granted. An SGO is a legal arrangement that grants an individual connected to a child parental responsibility. This allows them to provide long term care without completely severing the child's legal relationship with their birth parents. This is a middle ground between fostering and adoption, giving the special guardian significant authority over the child's upbringing while maintaining the child's connection to their biological family.

The pod aims to work closely with children's social workers to complete all viability assessments jointly for prospective connected carers, this assessment brings the wealth and knowledge of the fostering team into early assessments of family members helping them to prepare on their journey. Connected carers in assessment are also allocated a supervising social worker to support them prior to their assessment being presented to the fostering panel.

Assessment data



Mainstream Foster Carers - Support and Supervision Pod

Staff establishment for this pod is a team manager, a senior practitioner and six social workers.

The support and supervision Supervising Social Workers work with foster carers following their approval at panel; they have a variety of responsibilities from induction, facilitating training, support groups, formal supervision, reviewing foster carers and completing permanence assessments. The team also support foster carers with attending children's planning meetings and reviews.

The social workers within this pod not only work with the foster carer's but also their immediate family including their children and extended support network. We are mindful that unless the primary foster carers are supported that this may result in placement breakdowns.

The pod also works on a duty system to consider new placement referrals for in-house foster carers. In this role they will liaise with foster carers and children's social work teams to identify the most appropriate fostering match.

The support and supervision pod support foster carers with the following approvals:

Short term	Long term
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<p>These foster carers provide care for a child/young person for a period of less than two years. This is usually where the care plan for the child/young person has not been finalised and multiple placement options are being considered.</p>	<p>These placements are for our children and young people when their care plan states that they will remain in foster care for a significant period of time. Many of these young people remain with their foster carer under a Staying Put arrangement post 18.</p>
<p>Respite</p> <p>The aim of these placements is to support existing placements to maintain permanence for our children and young people.</p>	<p>Emergency</p> <p>This is to provide immediate support in the short term to children and young people in need.</p>

Voice of the Child

Gaining the voice of children looked after is crucial for many reasons, it directly impacts their well-being, care experience, and future outcomes. Involving children in decisions that affect their lives empowers them, improves services, and ensures their rights are respected.

Within Tameside the voice of our children and young people is captured through the means below and is the current practice of the authority:

- Children in Care Council (CICC)
- Care Leavers Forum (CLF)
- Children & Young People interview panels
- Corporate Parenting Board
- Skills to Foster course Children and Young People session
- Bespoke sessions where Children and young People deliver training sessions
- GM (Greater Manchester) Participation Network meetings

The above examples are in relation to Children and Young Peoples voices being gathered and shared with relevant services etc, so that we can focus on improving service delivery.

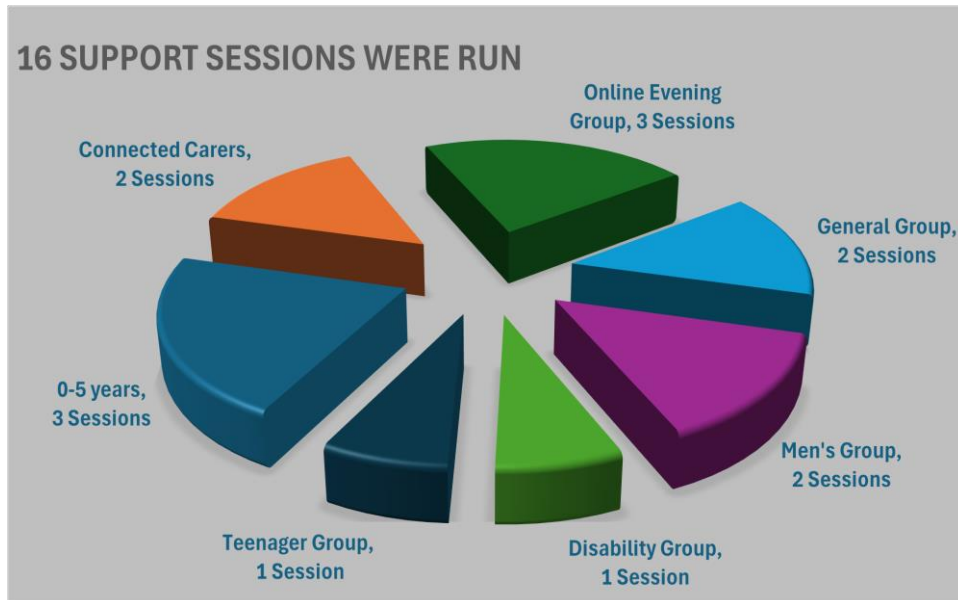
During this period Tameside commissioned Viewpoint to provide the My View app, however by the end of this reporting period this has been cancelled.

Our children and young people can also access support from NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) to assist them to plan their views, feelings and wishes in terms of their care planning and they can also access support from them to make complaints if they wish.

Support & Training to foster carers

A variety of Support Groups was offered by the service in this period which have been well attended. Interaction and communication between the carers and the SSW's facilitating the groups was evident from the relationships formed by carers in these settings. Carers have commented how much they appreciate being in smaller groups with other carers in the same situation as them.

In Tameside we recognise that foster carers value 'time to talk.' The following are the support groups that have run during this period.



Peer Support

A buddy system for newly approved foster carers in Tameside offers numerous benefits, providing essential support and guidance to carers as they navigate their new role. By pairing them with more experienced foster carers this can lead to a sense of community that offers practical advice and helps build confidence.

Where possible a buddy is matched taking into not only similar experiences, but personalities, location, and a general feeling of who you would get along well with. From our experience we know this works better when friendships are formed and maintained.

Foster Carer Training Offered

In September of 2023, the service appointed a Training and Development Coordinator (TDC) in a full-time post.

Since the time of this appointment the standard of training and accessibility of training to the carers has vastly improved. Training is now offered on a more regular basis in different formats.

Types of training offered

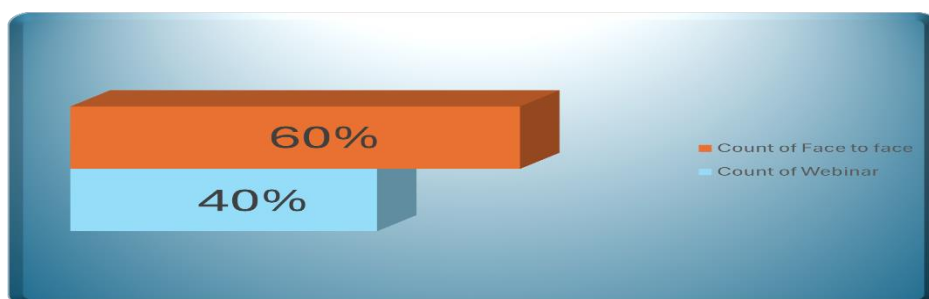
- E-learning (personal login to the MeLearning platform where training can be done in their own time).
- Face to face training at various Tameside venues
- Online live webinars

The below summarizes the training offered, attendance statistics, and other key metrics. The data covers various training sessions, both face-to-face and webinars, detailing the hours provided, the number of sign-ups, and actual attendance.

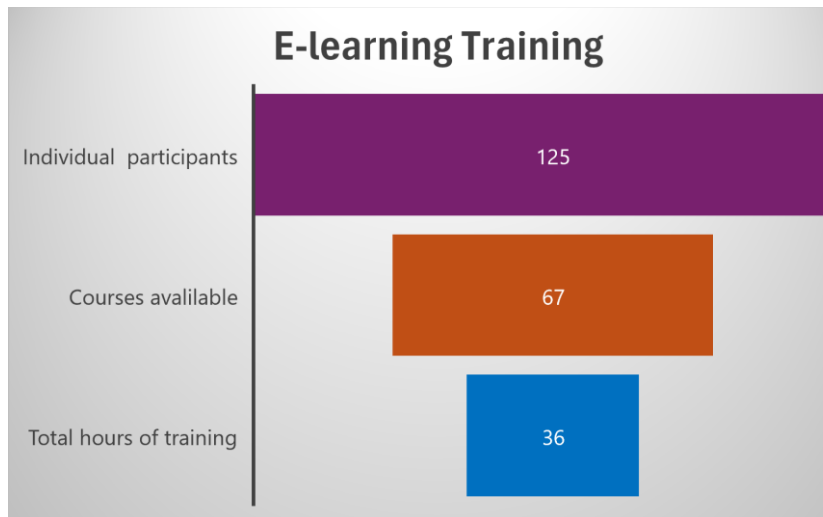
Training Overview

A total of 25 different training topics were offered. These were delivered through two formats: face-to-face and webinars ([list of courses later in this document](#)).

- Total Face-to-Face Trainings 15
- Total Webinars 10
- Total Training Hours Available 41.5 hours



E-learning



Attendance Analysis

The total number of individuals who signed up for these trainings was 370, whereas the total number of actual attendees was 209.



Therefore, there was approximately a 43.51% drop-off from sign-up to actual attendance, there are many reasons for this, , foster carers could have a new placement since they signed up, family time may have changed, medical or other appointments for the child may have come through etc. However, this is a high proportion and an area of focus for 2024/2025.

Training feedback from Carers

Feedback from the carers overall has been extremely positive, with many carers referencing this within their supervision or in other meetings or groups.

Below are extracts of feedback from the carers collected in the Training Evaluation Forms via Microsoft Forms following the training.

Although I'm a Connected carer it was interesting to hear the importance of recording for info to be passed to any future carers that would /could be vital shared information to protect the families

Don't feel this could have been improved to any higher standard.

Would like to see the online care recording as soon as possible. This would for myself I feel make recording easier but still write a diary for my child.

All of it was good Can't think of anything.

Well presented.

The training was at just the right level.

From this I have contacted and registered with a local support group.

The whole course was interesting and very useful.

It gave me more of an insight on why and how it has an effect on the child

It goes into more detail than other trainings I've had in the past in the same area. Area. It was all very informative.

No improvement needed.

I think it made me realise how much we do as a foster carer without thinking about our own wellbeing.

Don't think anything would make it better.

I felt that this was good training as I felt it was to help me as a foster carer. Also, that everyone's mental health matters. Also to try and take time out for me.

Re-enforcing the need for recognising that we all need to be aware of self-care



veryinformative
justtherightlevel
good
highstandard
helpful
wellpresented
veryuseful
interesting

Training offered within this period

Concerns, Complaints and Allegations	Internet security and social media
Family Time	Working well at home when home is your place of work
Trauma and Attachment	Behaviour Management and De-escalation

Financial Support

In this reporting period the financial support offered to foster carers is through a payment made for the care of the child or young person and a Skills payment. Progress through the skills levels is based on their experience, training, and competencies. Progression through the levels is designed to ensure that foster carers can provide high-quality care and meet the specific needs of the children and young people they look after. In this reporting period there are four skills levels:

Level 1 This is the starting level for Connected foster carers approved at fostering panel who have not undertaken the Skills to Foster training.

Level 2 For both connected and mainstream foster carers who have completed the Skills to Foster training prior to being approved at fostering panel.

Level 3 & 4 Carers can progress through these levels following undertaking relevant training and evidencing an enhanced understanding of child development and therapeutic care. Foster carers at Level 4 should have the skills to care for children and young people with more complex needs.

The current skills fees payments are competitive with the other nine Greater Manchester Combined Authorities.

Recommend a Friend

Tameside offer a 'Recommend a friend' scheme, which offers a financial reward to any existing Tameside foster carer or staff member who recommends someone who goes on to be approved as a Tameside foster carer.

Family Friendly Employer

Tameside Council became a fostering friendly employer in June 2023 to provide extra support to foster carers.

The policy offers up to 10 days of paid leave per 12-month period for employees who are, or training to become, foster carers or kinship carers (a relative or friend caring for a child who is unable to live with their birth parents) to attend training, support groups, and approval panel and other meetings. A range of training and meetings is essential to support foster and kinship families and provide knowledge and skills to support the needs of the child. Supportive arrangements enable the foster carer to feel confident in their care, which supports the child's overall wellbeing.

Fostering Panel

The fostering panel continues to play a critical role in ensuring that high standards of care are maintained for all foster placements. In this reporting period the panel have reviewed a wide range of applications, including approvals, re approvals, and specific placements, contributing to the overall quality and safety of foster care provision in Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council. The panel meet three times a month on a Wednesday morning.

The fostering panel is a formal body that plays a crucial role in the process of approving and reviewing foster carers. Its primary function is to assess whether individuals or couples are suitable to become foster carers and to review the ongoing performance and placements of existing foster carers. The fostering panel review complex cases when issues of concern arise regarding a foster carer, such as safeguarding concerns. The panel will review these cases and make recommendations on whether the person remains suitable to foster.

The fostering panel operates within a legal framework, Fostering Services Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The composition of the fostering panel in Tameside during this reporting period has been made up of an independent panel Chair, vice-chair, social workers within the service and independent panel members with either a health or social care background. In December 2023 the Chair of the panel resigned and the vice Chair became the panel Chair. There has not been a Vice Chair appointed following this.

Whilst there has been a designated panel advisor during this reporting period. The role has been undertaken by a team manager within the service as an additional responsibility. The panel advisor is a crucial link between the service and the panel both in relation to the function and role of the panel members.

The fostering panel has been impacted in terms of the development of the panel members who have not received training or appraisals during this reporting period. The panel has remained virtual which can impact the overall effectiveness of the fostering panel in terms of communication, building rapport, teamwork and technical issues which can impact the effectiveness of the panel.

For a more detailed analysis of all fostering panel's activities, including specific challenges, recommendations and performance insights please refer to the fostering panel Chair's report which offers an in-depth perspective on the panel's work throughout the year.

Fostering Reviews

There are 1.5 FTE social workers employed independently within the IRO service to undertake the annual fostering household reviews. Within the service they are known as FIRO's (fostering independent review officers). Reviews are in line with The Fostering Services (England) Regulations (2011) and The Fostering Services National Minimum Standards (2011). Which states that foster carers must return to the fostering panel following their first year of fostering and when identified by the agency. However, it has been identified that moving forward Good Practice needs to be adopted within Tameside with annual reviews being presented to the fostering panel every three years.

From the reviews undertaken during this reporting period the FIRO's have identified the following areas for development:

- There needs to be a greater focus on foster carer development, ensuring that training undertaken is meaningful and evidenced within review reports in terms of how it has impacted the care provided.
- The voice of the child needs to be reflected more creatively to ensure wishes and feelings are gained.
- First reviews to be booked at the earliest opportunity to ensure they remain compliant with the regulations and are presented to panel and ADM within 12 months of approval.

The table below outlines by month the percentage of reviews carried out within timescales:

5. Foster Carer Reviews					
Reviews completed - Annually		In time	Out of time	Not Recorded	Total
2023/2024	April	94.2%	3.6%	2.2%	100%
2023/2024	May	96.3%	1.5%	2.2%	100%
2023/2024	June	97.1%	0.7%	2.2%	100%
2023/2024	July	95.4%	0.8%	3.8%	100%
2023/2024	August	93.6%	0.7%	5.7%	100%
2023/2024	September	92.6%	2.9%	4.4%	100%
2023/2024	October	96.1%	2.4%	1.6%	100%
2023/2024	November	91.3%	6.3%	2.4%	100%
2023/2024	December	92.7%	4.8%	2.4%	100%
2023/2024	January	95.1%	3.3%	1.6%	100%
2023/2024	February	92.3%	5.1%	0.0%	97.4%
2023/2024	March	90.6%	6.8%	0.0%	97.4%

Our priority areas for improvement in the coming year

Recruitment

We are working hard to increase the recruitment of mainstream foster carers. The Communications and Marketing team are working closely with the recruitment team manager, and activity is showing some success. This will continue to be built upon in the coming year with

targeted recruitment campaigns. Tameside is now part of the Greater Manchester Recruitment Hub which went live on the 17th June 2024. It is hoped that this will increase recruitment activity and translate into increased assessments and approved mainstream foster carers.

Sons and Daughters Group

As a service we need to develop a bespoke group for our sons and daughters of our fostering families. This is an opportunity to share their unique experiences and we have identified this as a priority.

Mockingbird

Tameside is committed to establishing its first Mockingbird hub to be launched in November 2024. Prior to this a Mockingbird hub carer and Liaison Officer will be recruited.

Voice of the Child

There will be an increased focus on the 'voice of the child' and ensuring it is reflected throughout all work undertaken by the service. This will include observations of children too young to give their views. There will also be a focus on training to identify creative ways to gain the wishes and feelings of our children and young people.

Fostering Panel

The fostering panel has continued online via Zoom since Covid. However, it is a priority that this is moved to face to face in the coming year.

Staffing

A priority of the service is to recruit permanent staff across the service to include senior managers. Team building and development days to be implemented when we have a full permanent staff team. These days will focus on good practice, compliance and service development.

Communication with foster carers

To improve communications with our foster carers all approved foster carers will have a Tameside Outlook email address provided to them. This will ensure that there is a secure way for foster carers to communicate and share their daily recordings with the service confidentially.