

## Social and Health Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee

<b>Date of Meeting</b>	5th December 2024
<b>Report Subject</b>	Mockingbird Fostering Project
<b>Cabinet Member</b>	Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Social Services and Wellbeing
<b>Report Author</b>	Chief Officer (Social Services)
<b>Type of Report</b>	Operational

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Mockingbird model of foster care is an internationally recognised model that replicates the support available to looked after children through an extended family network. The model provides children with a safe, secure and stable environment.

As part of our commitment to enhance our in house fostering offer we secured an innovation loan to implement the Mockingbird model of foster care in Flintshire. This report provides an updated overview of the implementation of Mockingbird, the achievements to date and future proofing the ongoing success of our fostering service. We are in the final stage of the implementation plan which will be completed in early 2025 followed by a project evaluation which will provide an understanding of the impact and outcomes secured against the original business case.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1	That Members review progress in implementing the Mockingbird model in Flintshire and note the associated achievements including securing placement stability for looked after children.
2	That Members support a detailed evaluation of impact and benefits realisation when the programme has reached full implementation in 2025.

## REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING MOCKINGBIRD
1.01	<p>The Fostering Network has delivered the Mockingbird Family Model in the UK since 2015 under a licence from the Mockingbird Society, who established the model.</p> <p>The model's aim is to replicate the support available through an extended Family Network, with the fundamental imperative to provide children looked after with a safe, secure, and stable environment, with the clear intent to avoid disruption and unnecessary change.</p>
1.02	<p>The Mockingbird model involves the creation of a 'constellation' of satellite Fostering Families who are supported by a Hub Home that is operated by an experienced Foster Carer. The Hub Home offers advice, training, peer support, planned and emergency sleepovers. It also facilitates positive relationships and visits for sibling groups who are in care, but not in the same care setting.</p> <div> <p>The diagram illustrates the Mockingbird programme structure. At the center is a 'HUB HOME' represented by a blue house icon. Surrounding it are several 'FOSTER HOME' icons, also in blue. Above the Hub Home is a 'LASON WORKER' icon (a person). Below the Hub Home are icons for 'ADOPTIVE HOME', 'KINSHIP HOME', and 'BIRTH FAMILY'. To the right is an 'INDEPENDENT LIVING' icon. All these elements are connected to the central Hub Home by dotted lines. The entire network is enclosed within a dashed orange circle with the text 'FOSTERING SERVICE' written across the top in orange.</p> </div> <p>The Fostering Network's Mockingbird programme</p>
1.03	<p>Grant funding was secured to enable comprehensive research to explore the feasibility of the Mockingbird model in Flintshire. The research was supported by NESTA, Cardiff University and YLAB to research the benefits that could be realised through this Innovative way of delivering foster care and the associated model that could be deployed to respond to the needs of Flintshire.</p>
1.04	<p>In summary the research identified that the Mockingbird model could increase child wellbeing, placement stability, and improve foster care recruitment and retention. Specific identified service improvements include:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improvement in foster carer retention</li> <li>• reduction in foster carer recruitment costs per constellation</li> <li>• reduction in placement breakdowns</li> <li>• reduction in the use of external fostering and residential providers</li> <li>• a higher skilled foster care population</li> <li>• improved recruitment from word of mouth and competitive advantage.</li> </ul>
1.05	<p>This research informed a successful bid leading to a significant loan of £1.5m from Welsh Government’s initiative to establish innovative social programmes. We have been working with the Fostering Network to utilise this loan to implement Mockingbird as part of our corporate commitment to expand in House Fostering and rebalance the balance between in house and externally commissioned services for children and young people.</p>
1.06	<p>The implementation of the project was impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic and the original timescale for full implementation was not met. However, we are on track to establish our final constellation in early 2025. The loan agreement involves an external evaluation of the project which will be integral in understanding success, impact and lessons learnt. Originally planned for 2023 the evaluation will need to take place in 2025/26 following full project implementation. This report provides an interim update to provide assurance of progress and service delivery.</p>
1.07	<p><b>Project Implementation: Progress to Date</b></p>
1.08	<p>The implementation plan involved infrastructure development before the roll out of constellations on a sequential basis. The following activities were completed in advance of the first constellation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of an Implementation Group</li> <li>• Stakeholder engagement</li> <li>• Recruitment of Hub Carers</li> <li>• Identifying satellite families</li> <li>• Developing operational protocols, policies, and procedures to support the running of the project.</li> </ul> <p><b><u>Implementation Group</u></b></p> <p>This was completed at the initial stages; the HUB carer agreement was amended after the first 12 months to become more flexible regarding the needs of the service when not being used by constellation families. This was done in conjunction with fostering network as we did have differing views on fidelity of the model. We needed the model to work for Flintshire.</p> <p><b><u>Activities</u></b></p> <p>Engagement activities were completed, there was a recent event at the end of 2023 where feedback was provided by Mockingbird families around what they felt they had gained from Mockingbird. The main themes were around connected family carers, support from other families and building relationships with other children looked after. There were positive comments regarding the children they care for feeling part of a large family</p>

and recognising other children are in similar positions. The feedback included praise regarding the events that the HUB provided and including their own birth children.

### **Recruitment**

This involves both recruitment of in-house Flintshire carers and external Independent carers however the three HUB carers are internally recruited and have at least 3 years plus experience of fostering before they progressed. There is potential in-house candidates for our next HUB carer. Constellation families are given all the information regarding their commitment and working agreement. We have learned that a family needs to want to be a part of the group as they are welcoming others into their home and knowing other carers and children on a personal yet professional level. We have seen households who are not sociable or willing to embrace the model have left the group, we understand that a want to be part of sociable community is important within mockingbird to encourage a positive dynamic.

### **Operational Protocols**

A pack of essential agreements and clear directives are given to those involved. We have implemented additional safeguarding training for HUB carers particularly around the use of messaging apps as they have a constellation group for each HUB. and we regularly discuss improvements and clarity we can provide around the model.

Due to the flexibility of sleepovers between families, there are numerous agreements that require a childcare social worker to sign, due to staffing levels in other teams, sometimes setting up new families has taken longer than we would have liked.

Staff have more capacity to complete assessments and other crucial roles in the team when the constellations are up and running. The investment and time that it takes to set up a constellation shows long term when fostering households support one another.

1.09 The planning of the first constellation commenced in the Spring (2019). The experience of setting up the initial project provided learning relating to the recruitment of key staff, the identification of a Hub Carer and the mixing of appropriate Foster Carers/Children within a geographical cluster. Challenges in these areas were overcome with key appointments and an extensive programme of consultative events with Social Care, Education, Health Third Sector, Young People, and other allied agencies promoting the model.

As a smaller local authority, we have learnt that matching personalities and foster carers with their interests have been more successful. As a small geographical area locality doesn't appear to be a barrier.

1.10 Constellation 1 established in January 2020

- 5 Fostering Families and 8 Children Looked After and one 'When I'm Ready'. There are 2 Families who have obtained Special

	<p>Guardianship (SGO) orders and one currently being assessed for SGO.</p>
1.11	<p>Constellation 2 established in February 2021</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eight Fostering Families and eleven children and young people looked after and one SGO carers.</li> </ul> <p>Constellation 3 established December 2021</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eight Fostering Families children and young people looked after, one 'When I'm Ready'.</li> </ul> <p>Note, there has been change of HUB carer in all constellations during this time due to resignation / change of circumstance.</p>
1.12	<p>Ways in which the support has been offered in 2023/2024 are back to business-as-usual ways of working post pandemic.</p> <p>Home visit / coffee meet ups and social and activity events. Recent events include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pat a Pet (small animal petting at HUB carer home), children and adults enjoyed the animals and event together.</li> <li>• Wellbeing workshop, breathe work events which the carers enjoyed, and it helped them to prioritise wellbeing.</li> <li>• Training around Neurodivergence for constellation families delivered in a HUB home setting.</li> </ul>
1.13	<p>Ohana services provide therapeutic supervision for HUB carers and constellation families. This has been particularly beneficial to two connected families who experienced a bereavement that received media coverage, they continue to utilise the support now they are under SGO support plans, and it assists the stability of the care they provide for the child whilst managing their own emotions with the support of therapists. Usually, a NHS waitlist would involve a long wait for this type of support. Using this model it has been implemented at a crucial time assisting children to remain with family.</p>
1.14	<p>The COVID 19 pandemic presented challenges to Mockingbird and the fostering community and progress in implementation.</p> <p>The national foster carer recruitment shortage has meant like every other local authority we have had difficulty with the recruitment of foster carers (in general) meaning finding the right match to the role, while in competition with Independent Fostering Agencies, has been challenging. As the HUB supports around 8 families, the right household for the role is crucial.</p> <p>However, this staged approach to roll out has been somewhat beneficial to us, it has aided the service to recruit the right foster carers to become HUB</p>

	households, we have been able to succession plan, assess and retain experienced foster carers, the role is now seen as a career progression that reflects skills and experience.
1.15	The longevity of the project will see more benefits in terms of the support and reducing placement breakdowns and use of Independent Fostering Agencies if we continue to invest.
1.16	The following sections provide an initial analysis of progress in achieving the service improvements that were identified in the original service business case. Once we have reached final service implementation, we will conduct an evaluation which provide a more detailed assessment of quantitative and qualitative impact.
1.17	<b>Improvement in Foster Carer Retention</b>
1.18	<p>Foster carers are encouraged to join Mockingbird from the outset of their fostering approval. This is offered to general and connected persons carers as a support and training tool as well as creating wider support networks for the children looked after in their care, often seen as a 'safety net' if the placement were to face challenges or breakdown, the child would have several other families that knew them well and could support or even offer a placement too.</p> <p>Foster Carers report that it is attractive to have unlimited, planned / emergency sleepovers and daycare, and they much prefer this to an allowance of 24 days per year respite. They report that the children and young people in their care (other children who are not looked after in the household are included in this also which reduces the stigma of 'respite'). The extended family model allows for both the carer and children and young people to invest in relationships and the support feels more natural.</p> <p>Another benefit appears to be the community feel to the groups, they can support one another which reduces the demand and intervention from staff Fostering and Childcare.</p> <p>We have seen fostering households retained within Mockingbird when they would have most likely resigned otherwise. For example, when Foster Carers have separated, and single carers have continued with fostering as they have created support networks within Mockingbird.</p> <p>We have also supported connected and general carers to obtain Specialist Guardianship Orders and remain in Mockingbird for support, reducing the number of looked after children in Flintshire.</p>
1.19	<b>Reduction in Foster Carer Recruitment Costs per Constellation</b>
1.20	We have retained foster carers as they invest in the support from Mockingbird in a meaningful and genuine way. The evaluation will see to quantify the financial impact for the local authority.

1.21	<b>Reduction in Placement Breakdowns and Reduction in the Use of External Fostering and Residential Providers</b>
1.22	<p>There is no doubt the support from the Hub carer and other families is crucial and attractive as is 'on tap'. Within the Mockingbird group, during the whole period of the scheme there have been:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two breakdowns leading to young people being placed in residential care. To add context these placements were with experienced carers and the young people were moved in a planned way to their new settings.</li> <li>• There have been five unplanned placement ends within the three constellations over a 3-year period.</li> <li>• Two were due to allegations and were moved to foster carers they knew in the constellations.</li> <li>• Three moved onto alternative internal foster placements outside of Mockingbird, however two of these children have remained part of the Mockingbird groups still attending events and having contact with the other children and fostering families.</li> </ul> <p>There have been numerous examples of good practice where families who have known a looked after child have offered placements outside usual approval, which has saved on IFA placements. These households usually would not of considered a child or young person of this age range/behaviour however due to knowing the child they have put themselves forward.</p> <p>One young person remained with the Hub carer and has been matched long term, the alternative placement was offered in the south of England with a highly priced IFA. Remaining in local provision has allowed this young person to sustain friendships, regular contact with sibling, education locally.</p> <p>The constellations have also welcomed a young person, where the HUB carer supported until a specialised residential placement was sought for the young person. The HUB carer was able to utilise the support from other families during this bridging placement and they worked as a team. The HUB carer was able to give insights into the young person's behaviour, this assisted the CCSW to source a suitable placement. The HUB carer has remained in contact with the young person and remains a support, the young person asks the HUB carer to bring her dog on visits. This promotes an extended family model. This also saved money on an emergency bridging placement which are usual a high cost. This demonstrates the flexibility of the model and longevity of relationships.</p> <p>The relationships formed in Mockingbird have supported 6 children to move onto connected carers who have remained in Mockingbird or moved onto SGO and revoked care orders.</p> <p>The model has shown that a social family model can ease the pressure on fostering and childcare social work staff and the emergency duty team. The model supports problem solving within the group and there have been numerous occasions where families have supported and advised one another correctly and pressures on staff are eased.</p>

	<p>In the main within the mockingbird group, foster carers do not receive significantly above the statutory visits (akin to fostering regulations) due to the support that they receive from the other families and HUB carer.</p> <p>There is oversight of the HUB carer on the families, and they must submit records around engagement therefore the placements also have additional oversight meaning intervention and support can be offered earlier.</p>
1.23	<b>A Higher Skilled Foster Care Population</b>
1.24	<p>Within Mockingbird the constellation families have access to an experienced and skilled Hub Carer around the clock, the HUB carers also organise training and awareness events.</p> <p>Families meet with their constellations and also as a large Mockingbird group, these benefits foster carers as they are able to create links with other fostering households. These carers appear to be more grounded and realistic in their approach than others who are newly approved and not wanting to be part of Mockingbird.</p> <p>There are only 5 fostering families that are at Level 1 status in Mockingbird the other families have progressed to Level 2 and above. There are 7 foster carers that have achieved Level 3 through the Diploma in Foster carer of equivalent showing a high skill set to support others.</p>
1.25	<b>Improved Recruitment from Word of Mouth and Competitive Advantage</b>
1.26	This benefit will be explored as part of the project evaluation in 2025.

<b>2.00</b>	<b>RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS</b>
2.01	<p>There are several clear social and cost benefit analysis which are measured as part of the projects work which demonstrate the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Placement stability which avoids unplanned moves, avoids both the social disruptions for a young person, but also the need for high-cost emergency settlements.</li> <li>• Children missing from placement, which results in the potential for increased vulnerability in young people and less staff demand upon social and support services.</li> <li>• Children avoiding residential care, with the net consequence of reducing the social care budget and retaining young people within their social, peer and educational groups.</li> <li>• Foster care support, training, and retention.</li> </ul> <p>The evaluation of the project will enable us to identify metrics to demonstrate the realisation of these benefits or understand where</p>



	anticipated outcomes have not been achieved.
	<p><u>Welsh Government Loan of £1.5m</u></p> <p>COVID pandemic - we have been delayed by around 12 months to implement the model fully and therefore have not needed to take the last part of the loan until year end 2024. We have the funds for one more hub home as planned which will be taken when a HUB carer is recruited.</p> <p>We are in discussion with Welsh Government to agree the date for commencing the loan repayment. The repayment is currently scheduled for 205/26 within the local authorities Medium Term Financial plan.</p>

<b>3.00</b>	<b>IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT</b>
3.01	<p>The medium to longer term results of the project will determine the success of the model. The collection of key data, in conjunction with the Fostering Network, alongside localised social budget and scrutiny activity will enable a longer-term measure of the cost savings and social benefits of the project. As part of the loan arrangement, it was agreed to delay the external evaluation phase of Mockingbird within Flintshire. This reflects the challenges of Covid-19 and will enable the evaluation to cover a period where the project has been able to operate with full functionality.</p> <p>Mockingbird is not a crisis tool however has been flexible to include children and young people projected to enter constellations and they have bridged the gap in house to save on Independent Fostering Agency costings and most importantly the limited number of moves for a child to those they do not know.</p> <p>Fostering Network have used a case example as best practice as a tool to discuss the success of Mockingbird.</p> <p>External factors of two hub carers resigning due to personal circumstances has also delayed the establishment of constellations however families have been receptive and one carer we did learn was not the right fit for the role and the constellation is progressing well.</p>

<b>4.00</b>	<b>CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT</b>
4.01	<p>Plan 2024/2025</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Recruit and roll out the fourth constellation, recruit 8/10 families to this constellation.</li> <li>2. Continue to support Fostering Households to provide high quality foster placements with the support of experienced HUB carers.</li> <li>3. Support appropriate move onto SGO where appropriate and reduce the children Looked After Population.</li> </ol>

<b>5.00</b>	<b>APPENDICES</b>
5.01	Please see case study.

<b>6.00</b>	<b>LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS</b>
6.01	Mockingbird Research and Development Report.

<b>7.00</b>	<b>GLOSSARY OF TERMS</b>
7.01	<p>Hub Home Carer - this is the focal point of care, where all organisational social arrangements and sleepovers take place.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Satellite - Satellite carers make up the individual members of the constellation.</li> <li>• Constellation - This is the collective name given the group of satellite carer.</li> <li>• Mockingbird Society (USA) - A social care organisation set up in 1999 to promote the welfare of children within good care placements.</li> <li>• Fostering Network - A UK wide organisation that promotes the values and strengths of Foster Care.</li> <li>• 'When I am ready' - is the term used in Wales for an arrangement whereby a young person in foster care remains with their former foster carer beyond the ages of 18.</li> <li>• SGO - special guardianship order is a court order that allows a child to live with a special guardian until they are 18 years old and the order gives the special guardian parental responsibility for the child including the right to make decisions about their care and upbringing.</li> </ul>