

Hampshire Hive – a fostering support network – a conversation with Amy and Johnny

[Kirsty Ayakwah]

Hello and welcome to the Social Work Community Podcast, where we speak directly to social workers about the topics and issues impacting them and shaping the profession.

My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, Senior Commercial Editor at Community Care, and in this episode we introduce you to a new three-part series in collaboration with Hampshire County Council's fostering service called Hampshire Hive, fostering through a community of families.

Hampshire Hive is a support network funded by Hampshire County Council that assists fostering families across the county.

To date, the network helps 27 Hampshire Hive groups with 23 foster care support workers and over 500 registered foster carers collectively. In this episode, you'll hear from one of those foster carers, Johnny, who was involved in the original pilot scheme for the service back in 2021, and Amy, the team manager of Hampshire Hive. Both highlight how this community-focused fostering support network has been so transformational for the families they support.

Amy kicks off the conversation.

[Amy Alexander, the team manager of Hampshire Hive]

So Johnny, you've been fostering for quite some time now, where did it all start?

[Johnny – foster carer]

Della and I began fostering in 2006 and then sort of after a few years wanted some greater consistency which brought us to Hampshire. So then we transferred from an independent fostering agency over to Hampshire in 2013 and we've been with Hampshire ever since.

[Amy]

What do you think has been the most significant developments or changes in the last few years for you and Della and your fostering household?

[Johnny]

For us, I would say the introduction of the Hampshire Hives. It's something that was really, really needed. When we first started fostering, it was never alienating because there always was support.

However, as soon as the introduction of the Hampshire Hives came along, the wraparound support is just totally immeasurable compared to what foster carers had previous to that.

[Amy]

So I suppose a big question is where did we all start, isn't it? You know, when did the Hive start? And can you remember, Johnny, it was four years ago you were one of the original hive carer support workers and we started with six.

So we piloted six Hives across Hampshire. That feels like it was such a long time ago now compared to where we are now, doesn't it? Absolutely.

Because we've got 27 Hives across Hampshire now, and that seems a lot. But when you think about Hampshire as a local authority, we are so big, aren't we? And so it was absolutely needed.

But it's something we built up over time as there's been demand and need across the local authority.

[Johnny]

Yeah, and I remember having the discussions with my supervisor and social worker when it was all being spoken about, just straight away thinking, actually, this is something I really want to be part of. You know, we had some philosophical discussions between us and the supporting social worker about how much consistency and whatever this is going to provide for our foster children. So that's where, you know, straight away I was bitten by it and said, oh, as soon as the application forms come out, please send them over to me.

And she absolutely supported that and said, yeah, I think, you know, you'd make a great Hive care support worker. So that's where it began for me. And we were, I think you remember, Amy, we were one of six pilots to see, you know, was this something that was going to work?

You know, how is it going to evolve? And I remember having discussions with you in those early days and as we're going through the process of forming the Hives and shaping it to meet the needs of our carers. And each carer is unique in their own way.

And that's what made me so enthusiastic about the Hives is because it is shaped around foster carers as opposed to something that has been given and saying, 'OK, here you go. This is a Hive. This is how we're doing it.'

It's the total opposite. I speak to a foster carer and say, well, as a hive, how can I meet your needs? And their needs may change from month to month.

And that's fine because we can adapt that. And that's where for me it's that not quite so rigid format works so well.

[Amy]

That's it, isn't it? Because back in those early stages, it was about consulting our fostering community. It's about finding out what was important to you.

And the key messages that came through was we want local support that is available to our fostering household that is not nine to five because fostering is not nine to five. So you need that wraparound support. So when you need someone to reach out to, when you need some advice or guidance, you know, you can have it in a timely manner.

And I think that's probably from my perspective. I'm not a foster carer. You know, you are.

But from my perspective, that's I think the change I've seen is that carers are reporting and saying that they feel that they're being supported at a time that they need support. And so it makes the job easier to do knowing that you've support on hand from fellow foster carers because it's about community support, isn't it, Jonny? It's about not necessarily always for yourself being a hive carer support worker and leading a hive.

You don't necessarily need to answer all the questions. It's about carers within that Hive. So there's up to 20 fostering families being on a WhatsApp group, being able to communicate with each other and answer each other's questions.

[Johnny]

I would say that's 100 percent because I think it's like you highlight, social workers have their role with foster carers and that role is quite specific, that supervising role. That's not my role as a Hive care support worker. But what I do have is I have that authentic knowledge of what it's like to foster.

And like you say, it can be something, you know, it happens at 10 o'clock at night and I can respond to that, whereas a social worker wouldn't be able to respond to that other than out of hours or whatever. So how they can support is totally different to how I can support on an emotional level that actually I can connect with that. Generally, I can connect with that scenario from almost from actually living it myself because a lot of the scenarios that foster carers face, one of us in our group will have faced that or very similar.

So and I think that's the big strength. I'm in a paid role, but also I get so much support from my hive members that, you know, it provides that extra support for myself as well. And also in just increasing knowledge base, I think knowledge for me is invaluable.

How much do you pay for knowledge that the hive provides so much of that because we've got such a diverse range of foster carers. Some are fostering teenagers, some are doing mother and baby, some are doing toddlers. So that vast array of knowledge bank that we've got on hand.

[Amy]

So actually, when we think about it, we are very unique in Hampshire because our Hives are across Hampshire. We have 27 Hives. We have 23 Hive carer support workers who are foster carers.

To deliver their role, they have to be active foster carers. So they've got that wealth of knowledge and experience and expertise to provide that additional support across Hampshire. And it's about local support, isn't it?

You know, this is in Hampshire, every foster carer is either in a Hive or can be in a Hive. So our Hives are made up of different fostering families, different registrations. Some of our families in our Hives are county carers.

So they're approved foster carers who have families that have chosen to foster and therefore approved as county carers means that they can look after any children within

their age range and approval. Other members of our hives are connected carers and they have been specifically approved. So they're caring specifically for a child, an aged child, rather than any child within their approval age range or numbers.

[Johnny]

It's almost like our Hive is one big family. I think that is the one big massive strength as well. I feel that I'm part of a family.

We've made it that way. We've all worked together. It does feel like a natural family as opposed to something that's provided for you.

Hampshire do leave us with a lot of autonomy though, which I think is a slight strength. So although Hampshire is providing the actual financial and the structural support, it's very much each hive has its own unique way of doing it, doesn't it? So the autonomy is there.

We are treated as professionals in many ways in that we can make decisions. If they're significant decisions, we're always running by. But generally, day-to-day running, we've got that professional autonomy, haven't we?

[Amy]

Yeah, you absolutely have. And they're unique because the makeup of the Hives are so unique. So we have to adapt to the makeup of each individual hive.

Johnny, have you got any examples of where the Hives have really come into force to wrap around support needed that times have been challenging?

[Johnny]

I've got so many examples I could pull on, but I'm going to pull on a recent one because actually that's still fresh in my mind. A scenario had happened with a young person and the carer reached out to me. It was about nine o'clock at night and they said, my young person needs to go down to the hospital.

He was very poorly. So is there any support you can give me to save me dragging my other young person down to the hospital with me? So the scenario is she was a single carer.

So she was a single carer. She's not in a partnership. She fosters two children.

The younger one, about 10 years, was the one that needed to go to hospital and the older one was at home, but didn't want, obviously, to spend the night in the hospital. So what happened in that scenario was I said, yeah, that's fine. Give me five minutes and I'll be with you.

Got down to her house, went into her house. She then went down to the hospital with the young child. While she was there, he's gone into anaphylactic shock.

So then she's phoned me and said, this is going to take a little bit longer. He's gone into anaphylactic shock. Can you support for the night because I won't be coming home tonight?

And I said, that's absolutely fine. I can do that. I'll also let relevant social workers and out of hours know the situation that you're now down in the hospital supporting a young person

while I'm here supporting an older person to be consistent and be at home where he feels most comfortable.

So that was one such example that the flexibility of the sort of the hive model and how I could come in there and support in this kind of really, really tricky moment that actually four years ago wouldn't have been.

[Amy]

So how would it have been different before the hives came into place, Johnny?

[Johnny]

Yeah, before the Hives come into place, that would have been, there would have been two scenarios. One scenario is that the young person, and this is probably the likely outcome, the other young person would have had to either go with the carer down there to the hospital and then find out it was going to be an extended period, then out of hours to get involved and be taken to a total stranger for respite care until the carer was back out of hospital to provide that support. With the strength of the hive, again, the older young person, well, both the young people know me really well through the contact with me.

So it wasn't just getting whisked off to a stranger. It was me, Johnny, that they know and feel safe with. Or it might have been done informally, where they may have had another foster carer, if they were very lucky, that they may have known in their network.

But however, this would be done much more efficiently because actually I'm employed by Hampshire. So I had that professional kind of role, but I could go in there and then provide that support. Everyone knows that I'm an appropriate person to do that.

And I could actually support the foster carer that was actually in crisis, worried about this young person. So the bureaucratic side of it, the paperwork side of it, she could just not worry about that, just worry about the young person. I'll take care of everything else, which is again, for me, a massive strength.

[Amy]

And that's why our Hives are not going anywhere. They have gone from strength to strength, Johnny, haven't they? From the original six that you were a part of four years ago to four years when we've got 27 Hives across Hampshire.

And we will continue to grow as part of Hampshire's support offer to all of our fostering community. And so, yeah, I'm excited to see what the future holds and how we grow and develop around the needs of our fostering community. So yeah, can't wait.

[Johnny]

Absolutely brilliant.

[Kirsty]

Thank you for listening to this, the first of three episodes in our podcast series with Hampshire County Council's fostering team called Hampshire Hive, fostering through a community of families. If you'd like to find out more about fostering with Hampshire County Council, please visit hants.gov.uk forward slash fostering to download their comprehensive

information pack. You can also sign up for one of their upcoming virtual Q&A sessions attended by both a member of their recruitment team and a Hampshire County Council foster carer.

And listen out for our next episode with Jonny and also fellow foster carer, Andrea, who will be discussing and challenging some of the myths around being a foster carer. Thanks for listening to this podcast. Visit us at www.communitycare.co.uk for more content like this. Bye for now.