

Cabinet – 7 September 2016

Fostering Service Annual Report 1 April 2015 - 31 March 2016

Portfolio: Councillor Rose Burley

Related portfolios: N/A

Service: Fostering Service – Specialist Children's Services

Wards: All

Key decision: N/A

Forward plan: N/A

1. Summary

- 1.1. The requirement to report to the Executive side of the council on the progress of the Fostering Service is contained within The Fostering Service Regulations 2011, which came into effect on 1 April 2011.
- 1.2. The report contained in **Appendix A** is the Annual Fostering Service Report for the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016.
- 1.3. The report details the work of Walsall Council's Fostering Service during this period. It contains commentary with regard to our recruitment and assessment function, our support to foster carers, our responsibilities as a corporate parent, our fostering panel function and areas of success and service improvement.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the contents of this report are accepted as an accurate reflection of how Walsall council is meeting its statutory duties in relation to delivery of its fostering service.

3. Report detail

Please see the report in **Appendix A**. The headlines from this report are as follows:

- 3.1 The management, staff and foster carers demonstrate a commitment to the development of the service and the provision of good quality care to Looked after Children. The service has implemented its new structure; the most significant change has been the merge of family and friends work across the two remaining teams and the increased investment into the service to push through on the permanency agenda.
- 3.2 There has been an increase in the number of approved fostering households this year, resulting in the net gain of six carers; this has been achieved in spite of the

ongoing service re-design. However, there has been a decrease in the number of children and young people remaining within internal provision and an increase in the use of expensive external IFA and residential provision. This is because there has been an increase in the number of complex children requiring placements including sibling groups and a lack of available placements to consider them. It is also because we have seen an increase in the number of 'staying put' arrangements, which again has resulted in the loss of available placements and there has been an increase in the net number of looked after children for the period March 2015 to March 2016. Work for the coming year will focus on equipping our new and existing carers to take on the care for a wider range of children and young people which should reduce our reliance on external provision.

- 3.3 The assessment of family and friends carers is now managed by the Recruitment & Assessment function of the service. These assessments continued to be commissioned out until the beginning of 2016 when the three newly appointed Social Workers came into post. There continues to be a high number of family and friend carers caring for 120 Walsall children. There has been a decrease in the number of Special Guardianship Orders being granted. The challenge for the coming year will be to fully utilise the increased investment into the service and to fully utilise the Looked after Children tracker to identify, progress and monitor discharge from care through the most appropriate permanency order.
- 3.4 Fostering panels have seen an increase in their workload and as a result there are now 3 fostering panels a month to deal with the volume of work, especially from family and friend applications. The central list has been expanded to include a wider range of expertise which is more reflective of the community as a whole.
- 3.5 The service has an effective partnership with Walsall Foster Carers Association (WFCA). WFCA arrange a number of social events for foster carers, including annual outings, Christmas parties and coffee mornings.
- 3.6 The Mosaic case recording system has been fully embedded into the service and there is ongoing work with colleagues from the mosaic team to ensure that best practice can be evidenced through the effective use of the system.

4 Council priorities

- 4.1 Key Council priority of **lifelong health, wealth and happiness** will be addressed by working towards more children being placed in local internal foster placements to keep them safe from harm so that they can succeed and flourish and by doing so will provide job opportunities for local residents as they are encouraged to come forward to foster Walsall children.
- 4.2 Key Council priority of **Safe, resilient and prospering communities** will be addressed through effective recruitment and retention of foster carers who are able to meet the diverse range of needs of children cared for by the local authority. We aim to do this by strengthening our partnership with Walsall Foster Carer Association and working with them to ensure we have an appropriately trained and skilled foster carer workforce who can promote children's life chances through support with education, health, leisure and recreation. Children must be supported to acquire life skills to equip them for adulthood. Foster carers are

provided with delegated authority, which ensures that children in care are afforded the same aspirations and opportunities as their peers who are not in care.

- 4.3 Key Council priority of **Sustainable change and improvement for all** will be addressed through a reduction in the use of expensive external IFA providers and by redirecting resources back into supporting more children and young people to remain in the care of Walsall approved fostering placements.

5 **Risk management**

- 5.1 The risk emerging from the Fostering Service report (Appendix 1) that will require effective management is ensuring that more children are placed in local foster placements. Measures to respond positively to these needs and risk areas are integral to the ongoing development of the fostering service.

6 **Financial implications**

- 6.1 The financial implications for the council for managing effective outcomes for children and the Fostering Service are considered during the annual budget setting process and are in line with the medium term financial plan.
- 6.2 In terms of the financial context of this service, the service currently supports 192 Looked after Children within internal fostering placements and a further 120 in Family and friend placements. For 2015/16 the total cost of supporting both placement settings was £5,411,295, an average cost per placement of £309.94 per week.
- 6.3 The cost of supporting all Looked after Children across the range of placement settings for 2015/16 was £15.431m for 2015/16 with the majority of those placements within Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) or in complex cases, external residential placements. During 2015/16, Children services reported an ongoing financial pressure associated with the number and mix of Looked after Children. As part of the 2016/17 budget agreed by Full Council, corporate investment was allocated to Children services to ensure budget was in line with 2015/16 costs at the start of the new financial year.
- 6.4 From a financial perspective, significant cost reductions can be realised through an increased uptake on the number of local foster placements and a potential decrease in the reliance on other high cost settings such as IFAs. As such, investment has been provided within the fostering service to support recruitment and retention of internal foster carers to support overall cost reductions in LAC placements longer term.

7 **Legal implications**

- 7.1 The annual Fostering Service Report meets the requirements of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (Regulation 35) and Fostering Services: National Minimum standard 25.7

Regulation requires that the 'executive side of the agency' receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service. Prior to this, reporting to Cabinet was undertaken as good practice.

8 **Property implications**

8.1 None

9 **Health and wellbeing implications**

9.1 The Marmot Review: Fair Society, Healthy lives identifies 6 key policy objectives. The report in Annex A is evidence of Walsall's commitment to addressing the Marmot principles and in particular the following:

9.2 **Give every child the best start in life:** One of the key objectives for the fostering service is to ensure that we are able to provide good quality foster placements to enable all our children and young people to receive high quality care that will maximise their lifelong opportunities. The challenge is to provide even more children with these opportunities by ensuring the ongoing recruitment of foster cares is a council wide objective.

9.3 **Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives:** The fostering service has a statutory duty to offer training and development opportunities to its foster carer workforce to enable them to support children and young people to maximise their potential. This is now extended into adulthood with the provision for 'Staying Put' which enables young people to remain in their fostering placement into their 20's.

9.4 **Create fair employment and good work for all:** The service actively encourages Walsall residents and Walsall employees to consider a career in fostering. The recruitment and promotions worker is now actively profiling Walsall fostering service in prominent Walsall venues to encourage more members of the public to consider a career in fostering.

10 **Staffing implications**

10.1 None

11 **Equality implications**

11.1 Continued improvements in securing local foster placements, placements for children from Black and ethnic minority communities, and for disabled children and their families, will ensure equality of access to services for all Walsall children who are Looked After by the local authority.

12 **Consultation**

12.1 This report has been informed by consultation and feedback from relevant stakeholders, fosters carers, children and young people, and panel members. The report is a public document, which can be accessed by anyone wishing to do so and will be available on the Council website.

12.2 Specific consultation has also been undertaken with

HR-Nilu Ghai

Legal Services-Lynn Levesley
Finance-Ross Hutchinson

Background papers

Annual Report (Appendix 1)

Author

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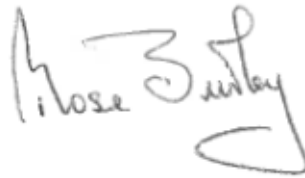
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David Haley
Executive Director
10 August 2016



Councillor Rose Burley
Portfolio holder
23 August 2016



Walsall Council



‘Walsall Children: Safe, Happy and Learning Well’

**Fostering Service Annual Report
April 2015 – March 2016**

Author: Linda Jean Franks

1. OVERVIEW

This report sets out the activity of the Fostering Service from 1st April 2015 to 31st March 2016. It will analyse activity in relation to the recruitment, assessment and approval of foster carers and also the effective support and training provided to carers. Reference will be made to private fostering, family and friends as carers, permanence and special guardianship support. Commentary will also be provided on other aspects of our service delivery such as responding to complaints and our corporate parenting responsibilities in relation to health and educational aspects of fostering provision.

This period was both a busy and challenging time for the Fostering Service, mainly as a result of a service re-design, a change in the management structure and the need to continue to provide high quality placements for Walsall's looked after population. There has been a further increase in the number of children and young people being placed in external fostering and residential provision and during the year the need to review our entire fostering resource has become more and more apparent. There has been an overall improvement in the number of newly approved foster carers so that when considering losses and gains, there has been a gain. However, the impact of this has been diluted by the growing number of staying put arrangements, the increase in the need for sibling placements and a net increase in the number of looked after children.

The Fostering service reduced down from three teams to two with the loss of the dedicated Family and Friends team resulting in the responsibilities for that team being split between the Recruitment & Assessment Team and the Support & Development Team. These changes occurred in April 2015 and are now embedded into the fostering service.

Fostering was the first service to implement Mosaic and as part of this new electronic system we were able to identify areas that needed further development before it was launched across children's services.

The assessment of our Family and Friends carers by an external provider has been reviewed, and as a result the service now employs an additional three social workers to undertake the Family and Friends assessments in house. (This came into effect in February 2016 therefore greater analysis will occur during the year ahead).

2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE FOSTERING SERVICE

The Fostering Service continues to be based at the offices at 106 Essington Road, Willenhall, during 2015/16 the service comprised of the following:

Group Manager Family Placement Service

The primary objectives of this role are to be

- responsible for the service planning and management of all local authority fostering and adoption services
- Registered Manager of the Fostering and the Adoption Service.
- Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA) for the Adoption Service
- Responsible Individual for our Local Authority Children's Homes

Recruitment and Assessment Team

This team is responsible for all marketing, recruitment, training and assessing activities. They undertake the assessments of mainstream and family and friends carers. The team

provides supervision and support to carers until their first review, undertakes back up placement duty and permanence assessments. A full time customer services officer responds to all enquiries from adults considering becoming foster carers or adopter's. There is also a marketing officer who has been appointed to increase our presence to the general public in order to attract prospective foster carers. The person commenced their post in October 2015 and has been instrumental in the production of new marketing materials and the coordination of new marketing events.

Support and Development Team

This team is responsible for providing supervision and support to temporary and permanent carers, including family and friends. They also undertake placement duty which ensures there is always someone in the office to deal with concerns or questions from foster carers. The team also completes permanence assessments and participate in annual fostering reviews. During part of this time period, the team manager and the assistant team manager were responsible for permanent family finding. This has recently moved to the Adoption team in order that all family finding is in a central service with dedicated staff.

Family and Friends Team

This team was disbanded in April 2015 with their duties being dispensed across the Recruitment and Assessment Team and Support and Development Team.

Coordinator for foster carer reviews undertakes all reviews of foster carers and is involved in aspects of service development and the delivery of some training.

The post continues is located in the Family Placement Service and the post is supervised by the group Manager for the Family Placement Service.

3. SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

A planned re-structure of Specialist Children's Services in April 2015 changed a number of aspects of service delivery. Firstly, as mentioned above, the Family and Friends Team was deleted and the social workers from that team were re-distributed across the remaining family placement teams dependent on their skill and experience. The issues of continuity of worker for children for whom adoption is the plan was addressed and now all care planning for adoption remains in the Safeguarding and Family support team until the final adoption order is granted. Family finding for adoption and permanent fostering was moved to become the responsibility of the Adoption and Permanence team to provide equity for all children with a care plan of permanence away from the birth parents

4. RECRUITMENT

Foster Carer Recruitment target – figures released in Jan 2016

Fostering Network has now published their findings on the wider national context for foster carer recruitment. The number of new fostering families needed during 2016 to ensure the provision of stable, secure and loving homes for the record number of fostered children in the UK continues to grow.

The Fostering Network annually calculates recruitment targets, estimating the number of foster families that fostering services need to recruit during the next calendar year across the UK. The figures take into account a number of factors including the percentage of the foster carer workforce leaving each year and the rise in the numbers of children in care.

In total for 2016, 9,070 fostering families are needed right across the UK, to give loving homes and supportive family environments to children. The need is for **7,600 foster families in England**, 800 in Scotland, 500 in Wales, and 170 in Northern Ireland. In particular there is an ongoing and urgent need for more foster families to provide homes for teenagers, disabled children, unaccompanied asylum seeking children, and sibling groups.

2016 Recruitment targets	Total
Northern Ireland	170
Wales	500
Scotland	800
England	7600
North East	475
North West	1300
Yorkshire and the Humber	775
East Midlands	550
West Midlands	1000
East of England	650
London	1150
South East	1100
South West	600
TOTAL	9070

Walsall has to rise to this challenge to ensure that carers are available to care for our most vulnerable children and young people.

In recent years responsibility for all marketing activity for the Fostering Service has been located in the Central Communications team. However, there have been changes in the last year. Firstly the Central Communications team was restructured; there was a reduction in the size of the team and thus a reduction in the time and support they could dedicate to foster carer recruitment. Secondly we were successful in securing funding for a Recruitment & Promotions Worker post. This is a full time post to provide and implement plans and promotional activities which assist in the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Sarah Phillips started in this role in October 2016; she has liaised closely with Central Communications to discuss recruitment ideas, events and recruitment strategy.

A Foster Care Recruitment Working Party continues to meet 6 weekly and is attended by members of the Recruitment & Assessment Team and foster carers.

The team has hosted 4 public information events during the year; one was at the Independent Living Centre in the Town Centre, the others were at the Family Placement Services office at Essington.

The “Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention Strategy” was produced in 2014-15 and is currently being reviewed.

In December 2012 we opened a “Fostering in Walsall” face book page and a twitter account. Currently 244 people “like” the face book page (up from 228) and we have 217 twitter followers (up from 182).

Enquiry levels

Fostering	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Enquiries	113	149 (114 excluding radio)	105	120	109	111
Offers	63	69	62	74	68	62
Initial visits	47	43	34	71	67	62
Approvals	17	22	8	9	17	18
Conversion rate	15%	15% (19% excluding radio)	8%	7.5%	15.6%	16.2%

Excluding 2011-12’s radio campaign, enquiries have remained steady in the last 5 years, between 105 and 120. In 2014-15 the number of approvals returned back to the levels they were at in 2011-12; this number has been maintained. Overall the numbers between 2014-15 and 2015-16 are very similar, which is extremely positive considering the re-organisation of service delivery.

Total requests for information and enquiries

Month	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
April	17	20	11	6	14	16
May	16	119	28	8	35	11
June	19	21	12	19	14	22
July	26	26	17	26	13	7
August	16	10	8	15	8	18
September	21	16	17	30	10	22
October	20	13	8	15	12	18
November	19	10	13	24	5	12
December	6	12	7	9	6	3
January	19	35	17	26	26	7
February	17	14	16	20	18	15
March	20	20	13	15	15	8
Total	216	316	167	213	176	159

The reduction in this number is due to a reduction in the number of people contacting us for information only. However, as the information is now readily available in electronic form, it could indicate that less information was sent out by post. Foster Care fortnight was delayed by a month due to the General Election and took place in June 2015

Information requests and enquiries by source of marketing methods

	Word of mouth – carer referrals	Word of mouth – other	Event	Local media – press	Other service publications	Leaflets	Walsall Website	Google Search	Face book	Other	Total
14/15	41		27	3	4	1	91			9	176
15/16	16	17	2	2	3	0	18	88	1	2	159

We ask people who contact us what marketing methods prompted them to contact us. Increasingly people have said the internet, so we have been more probing about this in the last year. However, the response “Google Search” doesn’t tell us what prompted them to look for fostering on Google; this is an area for ongoing service development.

We continue to pay £100 to the foster carer association for all the foster carers that they (and the foster carers) help us recruit.

Of the 18 families approved, the source of their initial enquires was as follows Google (6), Internet (5), Friends and family (2), Civic Centre (1), a previous foster carer (1), Walsall website (1), Newspaper (1) and a Magazine (1).

5. ASSESSMENTS AND APPROVALS

Of the assessments which led to the 18 approvals, 15 were undertaken by social workers in the Recruitment and Assessment team, 3 were commissioned from SWANN (an independent agency). The average timescale of the recruitment process from receiving the prospective applicants offer, to panel date was 359 days; which is a slight decrease in last year’s performance of 352 days. Considering the changes in the workload of the team during 2015-16 (the team also became responsible for supporting Family & Friends carers in their first year) this dip in performance was expected.

We have also recently employed an additional worker to focus primarily on the assessment and approval of applicants choosing to foster non specified children and young people for Walsall Council. These changes should mean that we are closer to meeting our target of approving the majority of foster carers within 8 months by the end of 2016-17. Three of the approvals in 2015-16 were completed within this timescale, which is an improvement on the previous year when it was only 1.

Approvals

Type of carers	2010-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16
Mainstream approvals	15	20	8	9	15	18
Mainstream de-reg & resignations	8	17	10	12	15	12
Mainstream gain/loss	+7	+5	-2	-3	0	+6
Short-Term Breaks (STB) approvals	2	2	0	0	2	0
STB de-reg & resignations	2	0	0	2	1	0
STB gain/loss	0	+2	0	-2	+1	0
Overall gain/loss	+7	+7	-2	-5	+1	+6

The numbers of looked after children have remained fairly static month by month, although there was an increase when comparing the numbers looked after on the 31st March 2015 and 31st March 2016, there was an additional 16 children in the care of Walsall. This coupled with the net loss of carers over previous years predominantly due to retirement or resignations; new carers are currently required for children of all ages. Although carers for teenagers and sibling groups are always prized, anecdotal evidence suggests that foster carers for teenagers often begin their career fostering younger children.

Our campaign continues to remain inclusive, engaging all aspects of the community, but focusing of key target audiences when appropriate. The target for 2016-17 is to assess and approve an additional 26 new foster carer households; additional resources have been provided to the service to try and achieve this. At the time of writing the report there were 17 families in assessment, it is likely these 17 will be a significant contributing factor to achieving our target.

At the start of the year the assessment of family and friends carers continued to be commissioned; however, due to the restructure this is now managed by the Team Manager and Assistant Team Manager of the Recruitment & Assessment Team. In January 2016 the first of three social workers was appointed to undertake Family & Friends fostering and SGO assessments. The expectation is that in 2016-17, these 3 workers will undertake the vast majority of these assessments.

There were 12 mainstream resignations during the year of Mainstream carers. Some of these were due to retirement or a change in family circumstance. Exit questionnaires have now been designed to capture the reasons for resignations; this will inform retention strategies for the coming year.

6. TRAINING

Preparation and Assessment Courses

Whilst the Black Country Skills to Foster Training Consortium was re – established in January 2014, in practice we have only been made aware of availability of courses by one other authority. All Walsall applicants attended Walsall Skills to foster in 2015/2016, bar 1 household who chose to attend in Dudley.

The preparation and assessment course devised by the Fostering Network follows the Skills to Foster programme which then directly links to and provides evidence for the skills assessment, and then the Training Support and Development standards.

Year	Number of courses run	Number of Walsall Households trained	Number continuing into assessment	Number of carers approved
2009/2010	12	21	19	16
2010/2011	12	25	20	17
2011/2012	3	16	12	22
2012/2013	3	11	10	8
2013/2014	5	19	17	9

2014/2015	4	22	19	17
2015/2016	3	18*	17	18

* Includes a foster carer who was already approved and their new partner

Only 3 skills to foster training courses were run last year, compared with 4 during the previous 2 years. One course was cancelled as it was close to the school holidays and attendees booked on were low.

Our assessments usually start after the training, and as our assessments usually take 242 days, (which includes the 30 days they need to be completed prior to Fostering Panel) you would expect many of the foster carers who were trained this year to be approved next year. It should be noted that there is not always a direct correlation between the numbers trained and approval. These figures suggest that to get near to our target of 26 approved foster carers in 2016-17 we will need to significantly reduce the time it takes us to complete the recruitment process, particularly the assessment timescales. We do not expect foster carers who transfer in from another agency to repeat the Skills to Foster training with us unless there has been a significant gap in their learning and development history, if this is the case then they are invited to attend the Skills to Foster training.

During 2015-16 we ran our first Skills to Foster training course for Family & Friends foster carers. This took place in March and 16 people attended. This course is offered to carers following their approval as a foster carer, this is because some assessments do not progress onto approvals, and therefore the resource needs to be targeted at those who do become foster carers. Prior to approval, the assessing social worker will provide some one-to-one training opportunities to enable carers to understand their responsibilities as a Family and Friend foster carer.

Induction training programme

The induction programme is designed to be completed by foster carers partially whilst they are in assessment and partially in their first year of fostering, to help enhance their basic information and skills required to foster in Walsall and to underpin the Training, Support and Development Induction standards. Workshops delivered are: supervision, safeguarding, recording, health of looked after children and young people, payments for carers, disability awareness, equality and diversity, promoting the mental health of children and young people, delegated authority and complaints / compliments; the practical care of Muslim children was introduced and well attended.

These courses were also promoted to Family and Friends carers, and open to more longstanding carers who wish to refresh their skills/ knowledge, or to progress to skill level 3 and have not previously attended some of these courses.

Post Approval.

Following a restructure in April 2015, all Senior Practitioner posts were deleted, and Practice Managers appointed, these has now been renamed Assistant Team Managers. Training for foster carers was therefore, no longer managed by the Senior Practitioner but primarily managed by Central Workforce Development. The Induction workshops were retained by the Assistant Team Manager in the Recruitment and Assessment team.

On 31st March 2016, a total of 190 mainstream foster carers, 6 STB carers and 2 Family & Friends carers had completed the Training Support and Development Standards.

The foster carers training programme is designed to cover the areas outlined in the National Minimum Standards. The following courses were delivered exclusively to foster carers, both mainstream, STB and family and friends: Paediatric first aid, Allegations, Positive handling, Education and children and young people, Combating Extremism, Sex and Sexuality, Moving onto Adoption, Domestic Abuse, Life Story work, Supporting children through the Primary and Secondary school Curriculum, Health and LAC, Attachment, Preparation for Independence, Safer Caring, Basic health and safety/food hygiene. Two new courses were instigated; Domestic abuse and Children, Spirituality and Religion.

Alongside the above, a suite of 30 different online training courses provided by AC Education continued to be offered. These courses are particularly suitable for carers who are unable to attend training during the daytime, or for those who have an identified need which our delivered courses do not cover. These courses proved popular and all 100 licences were used.

The training needs of carers continue to be explored and agreed within the supervision process, recorded on personal Development Plans and discussed at the annual review. Carers were consulted in February 2016 regarding the on-going training available; this information was passed to workforce development and has been used to determine the training programme for the coming year.

Solihull Approach

A strategic decision was made to cease delivering the KEEP programme, the last course being run in 2014-15. As a replacement it was decided to implement the Solihull approach training as an alternative. 1 social worker and 2 foster carers (with professional Health qualifications) were trained in delivering this therapeutic intervention in the autumn of 2015. The first Solihull Approach course, 16 weeks in duration was delivered to foster carers in the spring of 2016. This course was oversubscribed, and is scheduled to be delivered again in September 2016.

7. PRIVATE FOSTERING

There are currently 2 Privately Fostered children who have been assessed and are being supported by Children's Social Care. This is a significant reduction from May 2015 when the number was 11. Only 5 children in total have been notified in the year 2015-2016, none of whom were new notifications through the MAST/MASH. All 5 new arrangements commenced because of a breakdown in family relationships for children who were already known to Social Care and in receipt of a Child In Need Plan.

The process for assessing Private Fostering arrangements was revised when the new Mosaic recording system was implemented in November 2015. Private Fostering households are no longer assessed by the Family Placements Service and all assessments are now completed as part of a Child and Family Assessment. The purpose of this change in procedure was to enable more timely decision making regarding suitability i.e. Within 42 days of notification. The decision about suitability is now made by the Group Manager for the Initial Response Service when the notification comes via

MASH or the Group Manager for the Safeguarding and Family Support Service when the child is already known.

The revised procedure for assessing Private Fostering arrangements has not yet proved successful in ensuring that suitability decisions are made in a timelier manner. Children's Services has a wider responsibility for ensuring that learning and development opportunities for social workers, their managers and our partners working with children and families are available on the identification and support to private fostering situations.

Lack of new notifications via MASH would indicate that awareness raising activity across the partnership should be a targeted area of activity. The data would suggest that partners also do not recognise Private Fostering arrangements and/or have sufficient knowledge about their responsibility for alerting Social Care. In order to raise the profile, private fostering featured in the spring Walsall Safeguarding Children Board's newsletter. In addition, consideration is being given by partners to adapting the school admission form and accident and emergency form to include a question about the relationship between carer and child, the intention being that private fostering situations may be picked up this way.

8. SHORT TERM BREAK SCHEME

Short Breaks carers provide regular stimulating breaks for young people away from their home; usually one weekend per month.

The Senior Practitioner post in the Recruitment and Assessment Team which took the lead on the short break scheme was deleted in the re-organisation which came into effect in April 2016. At this point the established carers were reallocated supervising social workers. Since the loss of the dedicated post, there has been less time to dedicate to the scheme. However, the carers continue to receive good support and the service has an open recruitment campaign for short break carers. This will be an area for development so that our resource for short term breaks is fully utilised for the children and young people requiring this service.

The recruitment of carers has continued to run parallel with that of our mainstream foster carers. However, we have not had anyone come forward specifically for short term breaks during the last year; this may be because we have not done any specific recruitment for short term break scheme carers. As of March 2016 Walsall Short Term Breaks Scheme had 7 families providing a service to 8 children and young people.

The Complex Needs & Short Breaks Panel meets once a month; this is attended by Sharon Thompson from the Fostering (Support & Development) Team. The panel receives reports from social workers and health representatives of children whose families are requesting support packages whether delivered by a commissioned service or Direct Payment.

9. SUPERVISION, SUPPORT AND REVIEWING

The fostering service delivers effective regular supervision to all foster carers in line with their need for support, supervision and personal development, as detailed in the policy for foster carer supervision. The service has reviewed the broad training and

development needs of foster carers as a consequence of feedback from supervision, and provided training opportunities to meet identified gaps; for example, the courses on looking after Muslim children and combating extremism.

According to the fostering service regulations, at least one unannounced visit is undertaken to each fostering household each year. The frequency of unannounced visits is recorded and monitored via the foster carer annual review process. The service has consistently maintained a 100% target for the completion of all unannounced visits, and in this financial year the percentage of unannounced visits completed on time was 99%, a slight increase on the figure from last year. The frequency of unannounced visits may be increased when there are identified concerns with a foster carer.

The Walsall Foster Care Association (FCA) provides support to carers through a variety of activities:

- distributes a quarterly newsletter
- offers a buddy scheme to carers
- assists in recruitment activity
- participates with the service in developing and reviewing policies and procedures
- supports carer training
- runs coffee mornings and support groups
- organises social activities
- is involved in regular communication meetings with the service

Overall, when asked about support at the time of annual reviews, foster carers are aware of the FCA. Carers report positively upon the use of the buddy scheme and social activities. Of particular value, are the facilities available to host training events, coffee mornings and support to complete the training and development standard are rated highly by foster carers.

In September 2015, FCA coordinated a trip to a West Midland safari park for foster carers, including family and friend carers, their children and the children placed with them and staff and children from our children's homes. In excess of 340 people enjoyed the day. It was funded by the fostering service with match funding from private providers. This event is a fantastic way to say thank you for all the hard work our foster carers and residential workers do throughout the year to support our children and young people.

Another aspect of foster carer support is the annual foster carer review process. The reviews are independently chaired by the coordinator for foster carer reviews. This is a specialist process designed to look at the strengths and development needs of carers and to assess their ongoing suitability to be foster carers. Foster carer reviews explore any changes in the carers terms of approval i.e. category, numbers, ages and gender of children to be placed. The reviews are considered by either the fostering panel (first review or after an allegation, major change in circumstances or significant change in terms of approval/matching preferences) or by the Review Meeting. Over this period, 97 % of all reviews have been held within the timescale of 12 months –the figure is 100% for mainstream and 90% for family and friend carers, these figures are an increase in the figures reported for the last year. The coordinator is timely in chairing the reviews.

The service has undertaken an analysis of foster carer reviews conducted over two separate three month periods from 2015 to January 2016; we continue to be concerned

at the relatively low level of feed-back from children and their allocated Social Workers. All Social Workers are asked for comments for the reviews in a timely way, we anticipate that the implementation of the electronic Mosaic system across children's services will greatly improve the process for completion of feedback reports, and there is good evidence that this is beginning to happen. In the sample reports, there was reliable evidence that supervising social workers are seeing children when they visit, with comments, for example, as to the child's well being, their demeanour, attachment to their carers, presentation and appearance; supervising social worker reports are provided for 100% of all foster carer reviews.

Foster carer support groups and consultation events continue to be held – either facilitated by the service or by the foster carers for the coffee mornings. The meetings have general agenda items and sometimes have guest speakers. Feedback is positive about the groups, reporting that carers enjoy meeting their peers and sharing common experiences, whilst also seeking guidance and advice with difficulties which they have encountered.

Foster carers can access support and advice out of hours via the Council's Emergency Response Team (ERT). All foster carers have the contact details for ERT and reports from carers who have used the service are positive. Carers most usually use the service to report significant events and to seek guidance. On occasions Social Workers have visited carer's homes out of hours, most usually in response to children exhibiting disruptive behaviour. In order to support ERT activities, the service is looking to reintroduce an element of remuneration for foster carers who are able to provide emergency placement options for children and young people during the evenings and weekends. This is a critical area for service development to prevent Walsall children and young people being placed outside of the borough when they are at their most vulnerable.

Commencing in April 2016 the fostering service has implemented new feedback templates for disruption meetings in foster placements, and exit interview questionnaires for those carers leaving the service. The new templates have been constructed in order that information is recorded in a way that service learning can be identified, the information gained from these processes will inform service delivery.

10. ENHANCING CHILDREN'S WELL BEING

The fostering service works effectively with other partner agencies to enhance the well being of all children placed in foster care. The spectrum of the definition of a child's well being is extensive and includes their physical emotional and psychological health.

Looked after Children's health team

NHS Walsall Community Health funds a Looked after Children's Service which consists of three full-time posts which contribute to meeting the health needs of children and young people in care, (CYP), by offering an enhanced health service and reducing health inequalities in line with ECM outcomes. These posts include a Designated Nurse and Named Nurse for Looked after Children and Young People, and Health Advisor for Transition and Care (TLC). This ensures that all children in care, (excluding those on the short term breaks scheme) are receiving health assessments within statutory timescales and that any health needs identified at assessment (or at any other time) are addressed. The Named Nurse has responsibility for co-ordinating the health assessments and where

necessary to liaise with health providers in other parts of the country to ensure that those CYP placed out of borough have their health needs met in a timely manner. The Named Nurse supports further initiatives such as the health fax, delivering foster care training (incorporating the Healthy Care Standards) and close working with the Virtual School for Looked after CYP supporting those CYP with complex needs. The health advisor for TLC supports young people in their move towards independence and ensures they have the appropriate information to take responsibility for their health needs and to make healthy lifestyle choices particularly around substance misuse and sexual health issues.

The Designated Nurse (Health Co-ordinator for Looked after Children) has the responsibility for ensuring the service meets the health needs identified by audit and review and meets strategic targets both locally and nationally. Leading on a wide range of initiatives to further enhance and improve the health needs and outcomes for looked after children and young people who are the responsibility of Walsall where ever they be placed.

CAMHS

The service works with the local CAMHS service which provides assessments and direct work with children and young people with mental health difficulties. Children in care are also one of three priority areas for CAHMS. The amount of direct work with foster carers undertaken is limited, and the fostering service has commissioned an independent psychotherapist to supplement the service.

Foster carers are expected to complete the “Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire” (SDQ) annually for children in their care aged 4-16 to help inform the child’s health assessment. The SDQ is a short behavioural screening questionnaire used assess whether a child or young person has, or may develop, emotional or behavioural difficulties. Completion of the SDQ tool is essential as it can help provide an indication that a child or young person requires additional, and sometimes specialist, support. It is therefore an important tool to use in the ongoing assessment of a child’s needs and to determine if the child’s needs and presenting factors need to be further explored with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Whilst from 2012 Walsall’s completion rates for SDQ’s had been low compared to national averages this has improved with clear processes for completion being established and launched via letters to all carers and a briefing at a carer consultation event in November 2015. This year has seen a significant improvement from 9% last year to 40% in this period. Walsall is clearly on the trajectory of improving intervention for children/young people by using this tool. Should carers have any questions or queries advice can be gained either through their supervising social worker or the child’s social worker.

Psychological support

The provision of independent psychotherapeutic support to foster carers, adopters and special guardians was the subject of a tendering exercise in March 2015. The current provider did not re-tender which gave us the opportunity to rethink our service specification. The decision was taken to focus resources on placement stability for all looked after children and for those subject to a permanence order. Council for Kids (C4K) were consulted and they chose the name for the new service FLASH. FLASH stands for Fostering, Looked After, and Adoption Support Hub. The provision will support placements within a 20-25 mile radius of Walsall where there is a risk to placement breakdown and where there is a need to support placement stability. The service consists of a psychotherapist, psychologist and social work support and was officially

launched in March 2016. Awareness raising has been undertaken with foster carers and I am pleased to report that children and their carers are accessing the service.

11. EDUCATION

During this period, 9 children changed their educational provision because of a change in placement which is the same number as the previous year. 1 young person attended alternative education provision; there were no children without any educational provision and 15 children/young people were persistently absent from school which is above last year's figure. This is mainly due to the Persistent absence indicator which is any pupil below 90% attendance.

The Virtual School for Looked after Children works in partnership with the fostering service to support foster carers and young people themselves to achieve at school. Walsall commission a company to collect attainment and attendance data. Robust systems are in place to monitor educational achievement, progress and attendance of all looked after children.

The Virtual School delivers 3 relevant training sessions to foster carers each year and submits information to the foster carers' newsletter on a regular basis. Foster carers also receive an invite to all training delivered by The Virtual School. Foster carers are offered the opportunity to attend 1:1 training sessions on how to effectively contribute to a Personal Education Plan meeting. Carers are expected and do contribute to these plans, work to implement the agreed actions and contribute to their review. The Virtual School provides Family Placement Service with information about parents/carers attendance at Personal education plan (PEP) meetings and updates on projects.

The fostering service supports the Virtual School to deliver projects aimed at enhancing educational attainment and encouraging children and young people to be ambitious in terms of educational attainment. Examples are the recent GCSE revision week held at a local secondary school; the Queen Mary's High school for primary aged boys and girls, The Early Years Enrichment Project for nursery and Reception children, Extra 1-1 tuition and Year 4 & 5 Reading Project.

The Virtual School also provides advice and guidance to foster carers about educational issues, academic levels, career pathways and have produced and distributed to parents/carers a copy of their Special Educational Need Policy. The Virtual School works with parents/carers to identify new schools and support midyear admission process where needed. They also support parents/carers with transition process between Key Stages and provide additional support for identified looked after children who would benefit from additional support between Key Stage 2 & 3. If required, the Virtual School also offer individual support for parents/carers in the home to enable them to effectively support children/young people with their homework.

12. PERMANENCE

Walsall Council has a commitment to ensure that a child's need for a permanent home is addressed, and a permanence plan is made at the earliest opportunity. The aim is to ensure that each child has an agreed permanence plan in place by the second Looked after Review.

The expectation is that all children under the age of 16 will have a permanency plan; this can range from an eventual return home, a long term placement with a foster carer, a Special Guardianship Order, a Child Arrangement Order, or Adoption. For those 16 plus, the expectation is that their permanency plan will be addressed through a Pathway Plan.

Analysis of Permanence Orders achieved over the past 3 years:

Year	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Adoption Orders	25	38	32
Special Guardianship & Child Arrangement Orders	36	45	29
Total	61	83	61

The decrease in the number of adoption orders relates directly to the number of plans agreed the previous year. There were 11 less SGO orders made and 5 less Child Arrangement Orders (CAOs) made. Permanence is a real priority for the coming year, it is disappointing that more children did not have their permanency secured through the making of an SGO order, in order to address this looked after Children tracker meetings have been established in order to progress and monitor individual cases and additional investment has been made into the fostering service in order to reassure foster carers that they will receive support following the making of a special guardianship order.

Analysis of the numbers of children whose permanency plan is one of long term foster care who have been matched with their carers:

Year	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16
Internal foster carers	9	13	10	19
Agency foster carers	2	3	0	1
Totals	11	16	10	20

As can be seen, there has been a significant increase in the last year in the numbers of children whose placements have been confirmed as permanent with their foster carers, and more importantly with internal foster carers.

The process for family finding continues to be aligned with the child's Looked after Review, and the IRO makes a referral to the Adoption and Permanency Manager who makes arrangements for a permanency consultation to take place, and a family finder is identified who will coordinate all family finding activity.

An Adoption and Permanence Panel was established in January 2016 in order to give long term fostering the same gravitas as adoption, and family finding was transferred to the Adoption and Permanency Team.

On the 31st March 2016, all children with a care plan of long term fostering were being tracked, and in order to progress permanency for a wider range of Looked after Children, a full-time post for family finding was created, as well as a full-time post in respect of SGO Support. In addition, a Permanence Co-ordinator post has been established which will track and monitor cohorts of children, and provide advice and support in respect of progressing permanency planning.

13. FAMILY AND FRIENDS AS CARERS AND SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP SUPPORT

Family and Friend arrangements are often very complex situations with families struggling to come to terms with the reasons why the children have become looked after. These carers come from a very diverse range of backgrounds and with various levels of understanding of the children's needs for care and protection and there are often significant issues in relation to safeguarding. Some Family & Friend foster carers see themselves as family members not foster carers and require additional levels of support to understand and comply to a satisfactory standard with the fostering task.

Family and Friends carers receive the same level of supervision as Mainstream carers. As stated above, Skills to Foster training tailored specifically for Family & Friends carers was introduced in 2015-16.

Walsall Foster Carer Association (WFCA) positively includes Family & Friend foster carers in their newsletter funded by the Family Placement Services. There are family and friend carers on the WFCA committee specifically to represent Family & Friend carers.

In the re-organisation which came into effect in April 2015 the Family & Friends Team was dissolved. Some of the posts, workers and responsibilities of the team were dispersed across the other Family Placement Teams.

At the beginning of 2015-16 the assessments of Family and Friends as carers continued to be commissioned out. We had 3 agencies we used for this, SWANN, Core Assets and ISWA. We have more recently employed 3 assessors to the service, with the intention of them undertaking the bulk of the Family & Friends assessments referred to us. In 2015-16, 80 assessments were undertaken; 67 by SWAN, our own assessors (7), Core assets (4) and independent assessors appointed by the court (2); in the previous year we had commissioned out 99 assessments to SWANN, however, this included some viability assessments, which we no longer commission out. We have previously used the Family Rights assessment tool for assessments, but during the year we changed to using the BAAF (Connected Person (Family and Friends Report) At the time of writing, so far 5 assessment have been commissioned out to SWANN as the vast majority are now being completed internally.

On 31st March 2016 there were 80 Family and Friends carer households caring for 120 children and young people.

Year	Number of children placed	Number of carers
9/10	71	56
10/11	88	63
11/12	101	65
12/13	122	76
13/14	138	90
14/15	120	80
15/16	120	80

In April 2015, the support for special guardians moved to the Adoption and Permanency team and now sits alongside the provision of adoption support. Currently, 87 families are receiving financial support in relation to 122 children.

14. Placement and Resources Team

The Placement and Resource team was reorganised to manage all requests for placements for children and young people who are looked after by Walsall Children's Services. The Placement and Resource team is responsible for the single referral point which identifies all internal and external placements which includes fostering, residential and supported accommodation.

The aim of the single referral point is to improve placement choice, stability and continuity of placements by accurately matching placements to the individual needs of children and young people.

The benefits of this was for a team to manage all referrals for placements, internally, or externally, which will promote effective communication, as well as the management of information, particularly in terms of planning admissions and discharges of placements

The Placements and Resources Team is managed by a Team Manager, 2 Assistant Managers 6 Children Resource Officers that undertake a number of duties which includes and supports the placements of children and young people along with setting up contact arrangements, booking of taxis and sourcing Sessional staff for a variety of use within Children Services. The team also have the benefits of experienced supervising social workers from the fostering service to undertake the review of the internal foster carers and queries relating to respite, internal foster placements, including family and friend placements. They will also attend post placement planning meetings.

The single contact point provides a co-ordinated approach to placement identification for children requiring immediate and temporary placements in conjunction with the commissioning.

The Placement and Resources Team commissions all external fostering and residential placements, when our internal provisions are exhausted/ not available. The service will go out to IFAs with or without a contract and consider the fees subject to solo or siblings depending on profile and any issues. Costs are always negotiated subject to contracts / when the LA is working off contracts for spot purchasing. However they can be set subject to Service agreements. The team provides the monitoring of external placements as part of the quality assurance at an external placement panel with senior managers and partners that reviews external residential places.

15. FOSTER CARE RESOURCE

The primary focus for the fostering service for this period has continued to be the maximum utilisation of the internal foster care resource. It is essential that the correct placement mix for children who are Looked After is achieved in order to make the required financial savings, which then enables further investment in preventative services. There are some critical service issues which need to be addressed in order to achieve savings targets and to continue to provide a responsive service for children and young people. Foster carers have been made aware that the skill level scheme and

associated payments are to be reviewed in the autumn of 2016; the proposal is that we will move away from age approvals of carers so that there is more placement choice for children and young people. It is also proposed that our most skilled and highly paid carers will provide placements for older and more complex children. The priority has to be the provision of more placements internally than is currently available which will reduce our use of expensive external provision.

Prior to the implementation of Mosaic across wider children's services in November 2015, all data was generated from PARIS, our previous data management system. Since the switch over to Mosaic, there have been multiple issues with data migration, coding of placements and the availability of accurate information for statutory reporting. Mosaic now enables us to have much clearer information available on placement availability. However, because of coding issues the placement mix reported for 31st March 2015 can't be taken as accurate. Considerable work has been undertaken in order to ensure that placements are now coded correctly and the service is now confident that the vast majority of placements reflect the right code. This explains the wide discrepancies in this report when comparing year on year data. The positive is now that mosaic is fully functional, these issues of miscoding should not happen again and future reporting will be much more accurate. There will always be practice issues that impact on placement availability, for example staying put, which is addressed below.

Staying Put

The provision for 'Staying Put' has ensured that many young people are now able to remain with their carers for a much longer period of time and this year has seen 10 more young people and their carers taking up this opportunity. However, this does result in less placement availability for new children and young people. For the period 2015-2016 8 out of the 10 new Staying Put arrangements were for internal foster carers, which is a similar figure for last year. This means that over time the foster care resource will diminish year on year as more carers opt to provide ongoing care for children post 18th birthday. The challenge for the service is to support and promote staying put arrangements for young people whilst also ensuring high approval rates of new carers to maintain the level of available placements.

The breakdown for placements on the 31st March 2016 was as follows:

14.2 Placements

Year	Temporary	Permanent	Family and friends	Short term breaks	Total
12/13	194	40	122	8	364
13/14	184	61	124	6	375
14/15	134	99	120	5	358
15/16	112	80	120	5	331

14.3 On 31.3.16 there were 621 children Looked After which was an increase of 16 from the previous year's number of - 605.

In foster care by year (including those placed in IFA's)

Year	total number in foster carer	As % of LAC
31.3.12	382	78.1
31.3.13	455	78.7
31.3.14	470	75.6
31.3.15	485	80.1
31.3.16	483	77.8

Local Authority foster care (mainstream)

Year	numbers	as% of all children in foster care	as %of LAC
31.3.12	187	48.9	38.2
31.3.13	217	47.7	37.4
31.3.14	230	48.9	36.9
31.3.15	233	48.0	38.5
31.3.16	192	39.8	30.9

Family and friend carers

Year	numbers	as% of all children in foster care	as %of ,LAC
31.3.12	101	26.4	20.6
31.3.12	122	26.8	21.0
31.3.14	124	27.0	19.9
31.3.15	120	24.8	19.8
31.3.16	120	24.8	19.3

Mainstream and family and friend carers combined

Year	Numbers	As %of all children in foster care	As %of LAC
31.3.12	308	73.8	63.0
31.3.13	339	74.5	58.4
31.3.14	354	75.3	56.9
31.3.15	353	72.7	58.6
31.3.16	312	64.6	50.2

IFA and other LA Placements

Year	numbers	as% of all children in foster care	as% of LAC
31.3.12	94 (includes 7 in other LA placements)	24.6	19.2
31.3.13	116 (includes 2 in other LA placements)	25.5	20.0
31.3.14	121 (includes 8 in other LA placements)	25.7	19.4

31.3.15	138 (includes 5 in other LA placements)	28.5	22.8
31.3.16	171 (includes 14 in other LA placements)	35.4	27.5

From these figures it can be seen that the total numbers of children in mainstream foster care as a % of total numbers of children who are Looked After, has decreased. There has been a significant drift towards those placed in IFAs which has increased by 7% (an increase of 33 children and young people) out of all those placed in foster care. This is the fifth year running that similar increases have been shown and is an indication of the inability of our internal foster care provision being sufficient enough to meet this additional demand, hence the critical need to increase internal placement options.

However, is it also because of the complexity of some of the children requiring placements, especially for sibling groups which have shown a real increase as we strive to keep more sibling groups placed together. In order to address this, one of the key drivers for change for the coming year will be to focus on the recruitment of foster carers who can meet the needs of a wider range of children to enable more to remain within internal provision; this will reduce our use of expensive IFA resource.

Of the children placed in IFA'S during this period, the reasons for having to utilize an external resource were for sibling groups of 2+ children who needed to be placed together; children aged 12 years and over with complex needs; children with significant disabilities and/or associated health needs; children who were deemed to be at risk if placed locally; and placements for parent and child assessments.

Those children placed with family and friend carers, has remained static in 15/16 compared with 14/15.

During this period there were 27 unplanned endings to placements which is static from last year. The service needs to continue to undertake further analysis around the reasons for these endings in order to improve placement stability. Work will be undertaken on how disruption meetings are convened and conducted with a view to increasing placement support to prevent a placement breakdown or by learning from disruptions to support future placements.

Unfortunately the information system in use during this time did not provide information on performance indicators for internal foster placements –only the total LAC. These 2 indicators have shown improvement this year. The indicator for the long term stability of Looked after Children has slightly improved from 67% in March 2014 to 68.5% in March 2015. This has reduced back to 64.8% in March 2016. There needs to be a more significant sustained improvement. The % of children who have had 3 or more placements has decreased by 1% since March 2014 (11%) to 10% in March 2015. From what is available from the system in March 2016, 103 out of the 621 (16.6%), of LAC had 3 or more placements in 15/16. It is anticipated that the launch of FLASH will assist in improving placement stability as will the newly introduced PIM-Placement Identification Meeting; the purpose of this is to better manage moves for children so that more robust placements can be identified earlier on to avoid future placement moves.

Only 3 exemptions to the usual fostering limit were agreed during this period; 1 less than last year.

Financial implications

In terms of the financial context of this service, the service currently supports 192 Looked after Children within internal fostering placements and a further 120 in Family and friend placements. For 2015/16 the total cost of supporting both placement settings was £5,411,295, an average cost per placement of £309.94 per week.

The cost of supporting all Looked after Children across the range of placement settings for 2015/16 was £15.431m for 2015/16 with the majority of those placements within Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) or in complex cases, external residential placements. During 2015/16, Children services reported an ongoing financial pressure associated with the number and mix of Looked after Children. As part of the 2016/17 budget agreed by Full Council, corporate investment was allocated to Children services to ensure budget was in line with 2015/16 costs at the start of the new financial year.

From a financial perspective, significant cost reductions can be realised through an increased uptake on the number of local foster placements and a potential decrease in the reliance on other high cost settings such as IFAs. As such, investment has been provided within the fostering service to support recruitment and retention of internal foster carers to support overall cost reductions in LAC placements longer term. The return on this investment is unlikely to be seen for another 12 months when the recruitment and promotions worker is fully embedded into the service, the new social work post has have a year to complete additional assessments and the review of the skill level scheme has been undertaken and implemented.

16. COMPLAINTS, ALLEGATIONS AND CHILDREN MISSING FROM CARE

During 2015-16, the fostering service received 17 complaints from the following sources:

Children and young people	3
Foster carers	9
Children and young people's social workers	1
Parent's	1
Other professionals	3

Of these complaints, 10 were upheld or partially upheld. The learning from these complaints ranged from the need to introduce a pocket money and savings policy for foster carers so that children and young people receive an appropriate amount of money for their personal use. Some complaints resulted from foster carers being unhappy with their skill level progression, this has been addressed through now ensuring that all applications are presented to the skill level board and presented by the supervising social worker so that everyone is clear of the process involved and some complaints came from family and friend foster carer applicants who felt they were not given adequate information about the assessment process. This has also been addressed by bringing the assessments back in house, this was resulted in carers receiving more robust information about the assessment process and the responsibilities of being a foster carer for Walsall.

Allegations

There were 24 allegations against the Local Authority Foster Carers which is monitored under Regulation 36 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2011. These are under the category of Physical 20 Emotional 1 Sexual and Neglect 3. Of these, 6 resulted in child protection investigations being instigated. As a result of the allegations, 15 resulted in no further action being taken. The remaining 9 resulted in a position of trust meeting being held and of these, 8 children were moved to an alternative placement. As a result of the allegations 2 foster carers resigned and 1 is in the process of being deregistered.

Missing from care

The children missing from care are linked to 'Street Teams' for intensive therapeutic 1:1 support, Small group workshops and practical life skills sessions, Support in accessing other local services, Training for professionals and parents. The street teams are notified when a child/young person goes missing and on their return will undertake an interview.

Table of child /young person having gone missing (provided by the IRO service)

Month	Number of episodes missing	Number of children
April 2015	12	6
May 2015	6	5
June 2015	4	2
July 2015	15	10
August 2015	3	3
September 2015	8	4
October 2015	2	2
November 2015	1	1
December 2015	6	3
January 2016	7	3
February 2016	5	3
March 2016	9	5
Total	78	47

Street Teams works to equip children with the knowledge and support they require to avoid, reduce the risk of, and break free from sexual exploitation, grooming and trafficking. It is worth noting that this data relates to all missing children and not just those in internal foster care. Those missing from internal foster care are captured below.

Regulation 36, Schedule 7 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2011

As well as the allegations, there were a further 41 Notifiable Events. The majority related to missing episodes or illness or accidents within the foster home. Regulation 35, Schedule 6 requires us to monitor other activity such as minor accidents and injuries and the administration of medication of these there were 6 minor accidents or illness and 6 administrations of medication and 1 restraint incident.

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17. FOSTERING PANEL ANALYSIS

Central Membership April 2015 – March 2016

Chris Dennison – (Chair)
Jan Toplis – (Vice Chair/Independent/Social Worker)
Catherine Mitchley – (Vice Chair/Independent)
Shauna Webster – (Vice Chair/Independent)
Surinder Kumari – (Independent/Social Worker)
Liz Day – (Social Worker)
Deloris Walker – (Independent)
Bob Heighway – (Independent)
Alan Paul – (Independent)
Ann Burford – (Independent)
Balbir Kandola – (Independent)
Ruth Cherrington – (Independent)
Carole Moore – (Independent)
Christine Myatt – (Independent)
David Bradley – (Independent)
Councillor Kath Phillips – (Independent)
Nicitta Hanley – (Independent)
Kimberley Hull – (Independent)
Leah Arnold – (Team Manager)
Sian Wiseman – (Social Worker)
Pavandeep Singh – (Social Worker)
David Bradley – (Independent)
Maria Hadley – (Health)

Maxwell Gregory – (Interim Social Worker) – 06.10.2015

Erika Ower – (Interim Social Worker) – 06.10.2015

Pavandeep Singh – (Social Worker) – Membership on hold

Sian Wiseman – (Social Worker) – Left as of February 2016

David Bradley – Independent Member – Resigned November 2015

Maria Hadley – (Health) – Resigned May 2015

The new members of panel were Jan Toplis Ann Burford, Balbir Kandola, Ruth Cherrington, Carole Moore, Christine Myatt, Councillor Philips, Nicitta Hanley, Kimberley Hull and David Bradley.

There were seven member appraisals undertaken.

Panel Business

- 29 Panels.
- 18 Mainstream foster carers approved.
- 27 Connected persons/family & friends foster carers approved.
- 159 Reviews undertaken, 45 presented to foster panel.
- 0 mainstream foster carers had their approval terminated.
- 12 mainstream foster carers resigned.
- 1 family and friends foster carer had their approval terminated.
- 6 family and friend foster carers resigned.
- 5 family and friends foster carers resigned as the children they were caring for were made subject to SGO.

- 9 requests were presented under Regulation 25 of The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, to extend the temporary approval of a Family and Friend placement.
- 16 items were deferred.

Panel Staffing

Panel Advisor: Linda Franks. Teresa Kean was an Interim Panel Advisor for Foster Panels on 09.06.2015 and 06.10.2015.

Panel Administration: The panel has been supported by Sheila Perry-Jones, Carmel Yates (left the service May 2015), Vanessa Palmer, (left the service in May 2015) Tricia Goodman, Gillian Hateley, (left the service in February 2016) and Cheryl Harper.

Quality Assurance

A quality assurance tool is sent to all panel members to comment on the reports presented to panel. The form is completed by panel members. The Panel Advisor collates the feedback on the quality of assessments and reports back to their manager.

Some common themes that have emerged during the year are:

- The range of references must include referees with extensive knowledge of the applicant over a considerable period of time
- Ex-partners must be approached for their views.
- Children's views must be sought (as appropriate)
- All family members who are likely to be involved must be interviewed
- All prescribed checks must be obtained before a report is deemed suitable for Panel scrutiny
- The safer care aspect must include evidence of in-depth discussion with applicants
- The application must meet basic fostering standards and regulations
- 'Triangulation'. Far too often the word of the applicant is accepted without checking out their version of events with other sources
- Too much emphasis is placed on the descriptive part of the report with the applicants seemingly compiling too much of this themselves
- Recommendations can be a real shock at times when compared to the main body of the report
- There seems to be uncertainty regarding the inclusion of financial information
- When applicants are transferring then a reference must be obtained from their previous Agency
- There needs to be a minimum number of visits to applicants in order for the report to have 'currency'
- The inclusion and quality of professional analysis varies widely from one report to another

- The 'so what' question should be answered after each key descriptive section in the form of analysis
- This should not take the form of further description
- Wherever possible the assessor should draw on theory, practice and research evidence to support their analysis
- Rambling descriptive text should be avoided in order to not only allow for insightful analytical interpretation but also to ensure reports do not become overly lengthy
- It would be helpful if the text containing analysis was in italics

The above comments in the main are relating to the external assessment of Family and Friend. This has been addressed by the service by bring these assessments in house.

The Panel Advisor meets with the Agency Decision Maker following panel to assist her/him with any queries regarding paperwork and panel presentations. This is working well.

The process for completing checks and references for family and friends carers has been addressed through improved co-ordinated and monitored processes. However, there can still be some delay when family and friends struggle to provide adequate sources of identification in order to process statutory checks.

The timescales for submitting papers for quality assurance by the panel advisor is set out a year in advance. Each panel has a submission date to the Line manager, Panel Advisor and panel admin we all work with flexibility in order to not delay applicant's approval.

The service has recruited a foster care and a care leaver to the Central List. It is hoped that by increasing central list membership in this way that recommendations are made from a multi-agency perspective.

Training

A full days training occurred on the 18 March 2016.

Panel are updated regularly on legislation, good practice and Walsall council procedure

18. National Developments

a) Special guardianship review – amended regulations with effect from 29 Feb 2016

During the summer of 2015, the Government consulted on the role that special guardianship can play in the life of a child. The consultation response was published on the 17 December 2015 in which the government stated its intention to:

- *Strengthen the assessment process, to ensure that assessments are more robust and more consistent for all children, and that they are based on the fundamental principle that the person being assessed is capable of caring for the child for the whole of that child's life to adulthood;*

- *Actively consider whether further changes are required to the legal framework that underpins decision making around special guardianship; and*
- *Consider what support should be available to children living under special Guardianship arrangements*

To view the consultation responses go to:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/special-guardianship-review>

b) Special guardianship guidance Statutory guidance for local authorities on the Special Guardianship Regulations 2005 (as amended by the Special Guardianship (Amendment) Regulations 2016) (Feb 2016)

Amended regulations have now been laid and require that the local authority report to the court on potential special guardians includes the following:

- the capacity of the guardian to care for the child now and until the child is 18
- an assessment of the relationship between the child and the prospective guardian
- the ability of the guardian to overcome the impact of any abuse or neglect in early life
- the effect on the child into adulthood of being cared for under a special guardianship order, and
- the ability of the guardian to manage any risk to the child of any pre-existing relationship between the guardian and the child's birth parents.

Reports commissioned from this date will need to take account of the new requirements.

To view amended regulations go to:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/503547/special_guardianship_guidance.pdf

An extract of the revised Schedule (Regulation 21 "Matters to be dealt with in Report to the Court") with amendments highlighted in bold is embedded into this report below:



SG Amended
schedule 2016.rtf

c) Special Guardianship Support

The support that should be available to children living under Special Guardianship arrangements is still being considered. Any proposals relating to support for special guardians will be communicated by the government when these are confirmed.

The need to embed the new regulations governing special guardianship will be a key service priority for the coming year. This is a favourable discharge option for a high number of our children and young people. However, the Local Authority is obligated to ensure these discharges are conducted in accordance with law and statutory guidance and that the right children benefit.

19. Conclusion

In summary, there have been some extremely positive aspects of service delivery during this period, such as the amalgamation of the family and friends work across the service, the net gain of 6 fostering households having approved 18 new fostering households, investment into the service to create additional posts so that family and friend assessments are completed in-house and the introduction of the adoption and permanence panel, ensuring that permanency is secured for a wider pool of children. The service has also added to its list of members on the fostering central list, this means panels are now more diverse and representative of the local community.

The service re-structure is now complete. The majority of teams are benefiting from stable staff groups and individuals have commented on the apparent new culture of 'embedding permanence' since the arrival of new investment posts, although the impact of this on permanence orders being achieved is still yet to be seen. Of particular note is the successful launch and embedding of mosaic into the service. This has meant that for the first time all fostering records are now electronic and workers are able to input directly onto children's records.

The challenges have been the impact of the re-structure and the loss of some experienced social workers through retirement and resignations. There has also been a high number of family and friend carer assessments completed resulting in pressure on panels to keep up with the volume of work. This has resulted in more admin resource being needed and an increase to three fostering panels a month. The reduction in the number of children and young people remaining in internal fostering provision also remains a significant challenge as does the need to drive permanence plans, especially SGO in light of the renewed government focus in this area. Alongside this reduction in internal fostering provision is also the lack of placements for more complex children including teenagers and siblings groups, this has resulted in an increase in the use of external residential provision which is not only costly but also means that our children and young people are not kept within a reasonable distance from Walsall.

20. Future Service Delivery

In view of the challenges, there are a number of areas for service development for the coming year and most likely, the year after that. They are as follows:

- To further embed the re-structure of specialist children's services to provide a clear and robust focus on foster care recruitment by ensuring that the service is equipped with the adequate resources to increase foster carer approvals. The timeliness for the completion of assessments will also be a key service priority as will be the need to 'stretch' new and existing foster carers to care for a wider range of children and young people and reduce our reliance on IFA provision and external residential provision. It will be critical that in order to support this, robust consideration is given to ensuring the retention of existing carers.
- To review our foster carer skill level scheme so that more carers are incentivised to consider placements of older more complex children alongside the provision for emergency placements.
- To consider how the service can better manage the identification, assessment, approval and support of family and friend carers in ensuring that where appropriate these progress through to an SGO or CAO within 6 -12 months of placement.

- To ensure that the single referral point is effective in identifying suitable and robust placements for Looked after Children.
- To ensure that there is a system in place to consult with foster carers on key service developments.
- To embed a culture of 'permanence' across children's services by ensuring that the expertise within the family placement service is shared with wider children's services so that more children have a plan of permanence agreed at the earliest opportunity.
- To further embed Mosaic into the service and to ensure that this evidences good practice and that fostering can be seen to have a clear 'footprint' onto a child's journey.