

Fostering Service Annual Report 2019-2020

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 This report summarises the activity of the Fostering Service from 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020.
- 1.2 Walsall Council is committed to ensuring that wherever possible, children are supported to live with their birth parents. Where this has not been possible and children become looked after, it is preferable that they live within a family setting. It is the aim of the council that wherever possible, this will be with a fostering household approved by Walsall Council rather than through the commissioning an external placement. Through guidance on delegated authority, there is a recognition that foster carers should be empowered to take on the day to day tasks of parenting in the same way as any good parent would.
- 1.3 Foster care is subject to legislative and regulatory guidance through, The Children Act 1989, The Fostering Regulations 2011 and the Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011. It is further regulated through the Care Planning, Placement and Case Regulations 2010. The regulatory framework for fostering sets out the minimum standards expected to ensure that the care provided by foster carers is adequate to ensure that those children placed within fostering placements are well cared for and achieve good outcomes.
- 1.4 Fostering placements are referred to as either mainstream or connected persons. Connected persons fostering refers to those households who offer to provide care to a child known to them, usually a relative. Mainstream foster care refers to a range of households who apply to become foster carers for children not known to them. Mainstream foster carers include those offering both long-and short-term care and those who provide respite care. Mainstream carers can be approved to care for between one and three children at a time and can care for children throughout the age range.

2. The Structure Of The Fostering Service

- 2.1 In March 2019 as part of the improvement agenda for Children's Social Care a review of the Fostering Service was undertaken in March 2019 which made a number of key recommendations to drive improvements in recruiting, assessing, supervising and supporting mainstream and connected foster carers.
- 2.2 A key recommendation was in respect to the span of management grip and oversight. The review lead to the creation of 4 teams and strengthened management structure to drive improvements in the meeting regulatory requirements, supervision of staff and quality of practice required to undertake assessments, supervision and support to Mainstream and Connected Foster Carers. The proposal endorsed by Directorate Management Team involved

deleting two existing Assistant Team Manger posts and the Panel Advisor post, creating 2 additional Team Managers and creating three Senior Practitioners. Full implementation of the redesigned structure became operational in April 2020

- 2.3 Critically a fourth team was created to increase the capacity for connected persons assessment and to enable those who support and supervise connected persons foster carers and Special Guardians to specialise in this work. There has been a significant rise in the proportion of children cared for in such foster homes and combining the supervision of these households has enabled greater focus in the mainstream support team on growing in house mainstream capacity.
- 2.4 The Fostering Service located to Fallings Heath in January 2020 and is managed by the Group Manager for Provider Services who reports to Head of Service for Corporate Parenting. It is comprised of 4 teams and has responsibility for the recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers and the assessment and support of Special Guardians.

3. Service Development

- 3.1 Recruitment and establishing key people into role has been a priority for the service.
- Group Manager joined the service in late November 2019
 - Team Manager for the Mockingbird Team joined in November 2019
 - Team Manager for Connected Persons Team joined in March 2020
 - 3 Senior Practitioners took up their posts in April 2020
 - The Recruitment and Promotion Officer joined in May 2020.
- 3.2 Over this period the service increased the recruitment of permanent staff reducing the number of agency social workers significantly.
- 3.3 A Team Manager now manages each team and all except the Recruitment and Assessment Team have a Senior Practitioner. Each team has 5 fulltime social worker posts. The new structure compromises of the following teams:

- **Recruitment & Assessment**

This team is responsible for the assessments of mainstream foster carers. The team provides supervision and support to carers until their first annual review. A full time customer services officer responds to all enquiries from adults expressing interest in becoming foster carers. This team also operates a duty service. The team is also responsible for all marketing, recruitment, training and assessment activities. There is also a Recruitment and Promotions officer post that is instrumental in the production of new marketing materials and the coordination of new marketing events. This post was vacant from October 2019 to May 2020 and was advertised at least three times before an appointment was made.

- **Support & Development**

This team is responsible for providing supervision and support to temporary and permanent carers, including family and friends (known as Connected Carers). They also provide a duty service that ensures there is always someone available to deal with concerns or questions from foster carers. The team also completes Special Guardianship assessments on approved Foster Carers and are responsible for the submission of reports to the Annual Foster Carer Reviews.

- **Support & Development (Mockingbird)**

Leads on the development and support for delivering the Mockingbird Fostering model for the Local Authority and the duties set out above. There are three Mockingbird constellations providing foster homes for 93 children. Walsall continues to work with Fostering Network in developing and delivering within the efficacy of the model.

- **Connected Persons**

The team provides assessment of friends and family members to become a Connected Carers under the Fostering Regulations or to apply for a Special Guardianship Order. When required, to meet demand, they will also act as Supervising Social Workers to approved Foster Carers. This team is also responsible for post order support to Special Guardians.

- **Independent Fostering Reviewing Officer** - The IFRO now undertakes all first reviews of foster carers, reviews of carers following concerns and allegations and every third subsequent annual reviews. All reviews chaired by Fostering Reviewing Officer are submitted to Panel for a recommendation.

3.4 Between April 2019 and March 2020, there were two new Mainstream Foster Carers approved at Fostering Panel. This is a low number of approvals and is a key factor in informing the redesign of the service. Over this period resources were diverted to meeting the demand of assessments for connected carers for children in care proceedings. In 2019/20, 24 Connected Person Households were recommend for approval at Fostering Panel.

3.5 At the end of March 2020, there were 671 Looked after Children. Of the 671 children, 520 children (77%) were living with foster carers of which 294 were living with Walsall foster carers compared with 302 at the end of March 2019. This equates to 43.8% of those children in foster care in 2020 compared with 49.1% in 2019.

3.6 On the 31/3/20, of the total number of looked after children 50.7% were living with Walsall foster carers. The number of children living with internal

mainstream foster carers reduced from 190 on 31/3/19 to 162 on 31/3/20. On 31/3/20, there were 227 children living with independent fostering agencies and this is an increase compared with the 158 on 31/3/19.

4. Marketing, Recruitment and Mainstream Approvals

- 4.1 The Fostering Recruitment and Promotion Worker post was vacant for several months in 2019/20. The service took part in a 3rd regional recruitment film project across the West Midlands in May 2019. Up until November 2019, the Recruitment and Promotions Worker organised Foster Care Fortnight and programme of social media posts on Facebook and Twitter and quarterly newspaper campaigns. The recruitment activity reduced over the period that the post was vacant and recommenced rigorously since May 2020
- 4.2 In 2018/19, a full review of the marketing strategy was undertaken in light of the developments within social media. The review found that although the service was a leader in the region with the website design and use of Facebook as well as starting to make good use of Twitter, the gains could not be fully realised without a Customer Relations Management (CRM) tool. The service invested in software and had taken time to be embedded. Whilst there is now an improved focus on making better use of this resource, further work is underway to fully integrate it in promotional and recruitment activity within the service.
- 4.3 Walsall has a strong social media presence established with interactions from media and existing carers. Recruitment activity has included extensive use of social media such Facebook and Twitter. Our online content on the website is regularly updated. In light of Covid 19, the team has quickly adjusted in to host recruitment events online with live, interactive sessions with members of the recruitment team. These are advertised on all our online platforms and Walsall once again has a strong social media presence. Recruitment activity has included extensive use of social media such Facebook, Twitter and more recently, Instagram.
- 4.4 **Foster Carer Recruitment – National Picture:**
- 4.5 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. Within the West Midlands the Fostering Network calculate that a further 850 fostering households would be required in order to meet the rising demand for local family based placements.
- 4.6 During 2019/2020, 20 public events were held in and around Walsall (including those during Foster Care Fortnight). Some of these were events we arranged (e.g. Drop ins), others were where we had a stall at a larger event (e.g. Walsall Pride). Attendance at information sessions has increased and over 40 people approached us to discuss becoming a foster carer at these events.

4.7 Enquiry levels:

Fostering	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Enquiries	116	135	95	57
Initial visits	75	57	39	44
Approvals	21	13	12	2
Conversion rate	17%	10%	13%	4%

4.8 The low numbers of enquiries during this period would be partly due to there being no Recruitment & Promotions Worker for significant periods over the last 2 years. In the same period, though, there has also been a drop in the conversion rate from enquiry to approval.

4.9 The Recruitment & Assessment Team over this period, were allocated increasing numbers of connected persons carers to supervise and support, which diverted focus and resources from the recruitment and assessment of Mainstream foster carers. One of the reasons for the recent re-structure of the service, was to re-create a team primarily focused on the recruitment and assessment of Mainstream foster carers.

4.10 In 2019/20, there were only two new mainstream fostering approvals. As there were 16 deregistrations or resignations, this represents an overall loss of 14 Foster Carers. As the number of deregistrations or resignations have not changed significantly, the overall loss is attributed to the significantly low numbers of new Foster Carers assessed and approved in 2019/20 and this the lowest number of new Foster Carers approved.

4.11 In terms of the 16 resignations/de-registrations, the reasons were Transferred to IFA 3; Initiated by fostering service 6; Initiated by foster carer 6; Transferred to Local Authority 1.

5. Occupancy of Mainstream Foster Carers

5.1 Walsall's mainstream foster carers now provide an average of 1.6 approved placements per household. The total number of approved placements on 31/3/20 was 101. Over the past 12 months, this percentage has remained static at 1.6. The role of Placements Liaison Officer was also created in April 2019 to support the efficient matching of in house foster carers to children requiring a foster placement. This role has supported the service to increase occupancy rates of in-house household and the close working between the Fostering Service and the Placements Team is considered to be a contributory fact in maintaining this percentage.

6. Connected Persons Fostering & Special Guardianship Orders

6.1 Connected Persons arrangements are often complex situations with families supporting children who have become looked after. Connected Person carers receive the same level of supervision as mainstream carers. The Skills to

Foster training tailored specifically for Connected Persons carers and continues to be offered to Connected Person carers.

6.2 In 2019/20, 24 Connected Person Households were recommend for approval at Fostering Panel.

6.3 The table below outlines the number of children living with Connected Carers. The number of children cared for in a connected persons fostering arrangement approved by Walsall Council increased by 16.5% in 2019/20. The service is actively promoting legal permanence through Special Guardianship for children for whom this is the preferred outcome.

Year End	2017	2018	2019	2020
Connected Care (Fostering)	130	127	115	134
% of total LAC	20.1	19.9	18.7	20.0
SGOs from care	25	27	26	28
% discharges from care	14.9	12.3	14.7	14.8

6.4 The post of Permanency Co-ordinator was reviewed and refocused in 2019. All children with a care plan of long term fostering, adoption and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) are tracked in respect to timeliness and to prevent delays for our looked after children. The full time post for Special Guardianship Support has supported families in progressing SGO applications as a means to achieve permanency with the confidence that this support will be offered after the order is granted.

6.5 Walsall has a commitment to ensure that a child's need for a permanent home is addressed and that 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.

6.6 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 their Pathway Plan.

6.7 The table below outlines the number of children for who an SGO was granted.



7. Supervision, Support, Training & Development

7.1 The service review considered the need to focus on the consistency of support given to foster carers through ensuring consistency of the supervisory relationship, regular visiting patterns and that annual reviews of the foster carer's work take place.

- Supervision - 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.
- Visits - 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 on Mosaic and monitored via the foster carer annual review process. In 2018/19, compliance at the end of financial year was 90%. The performance at the end of 2019/20 improved slightly to 94%.

7.2 Foster Carer Training is provided through the Children's Workforce Development Team. This includes both mandatory courses ensuring that foster carers have the training necessary to undertake their role and more in-depth training for those carers who want to develop particular specialisms or a deeper knowledge of a subject area.

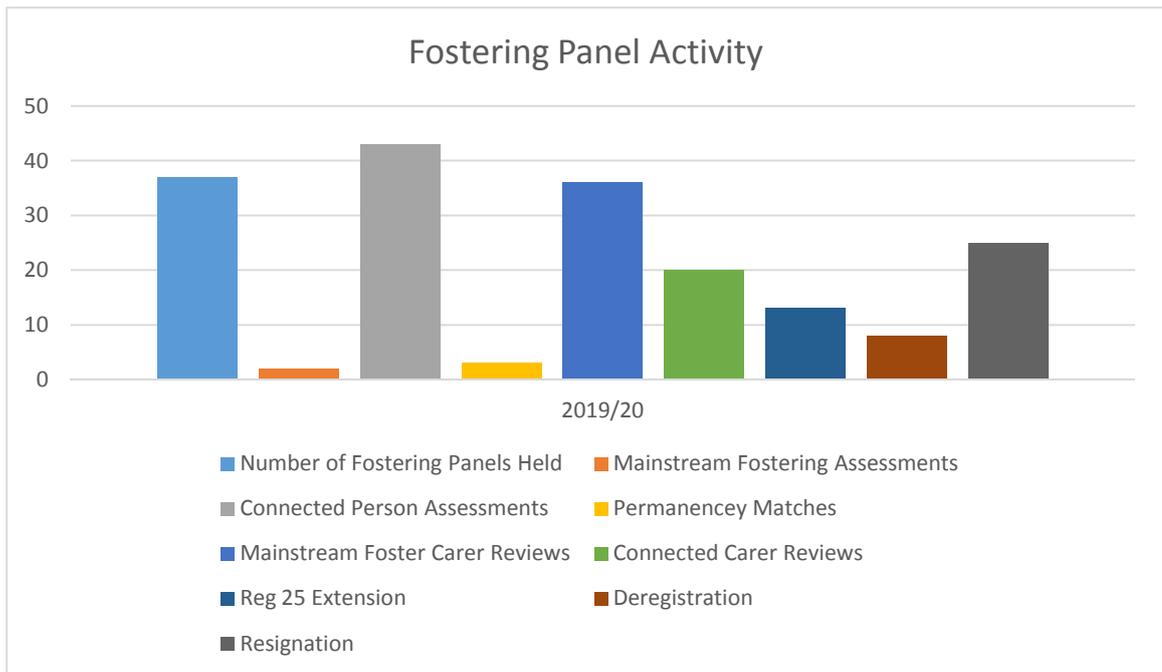
7.3 Preparation and training groups (Skills to Foster) have been held for all prospective mainstream foster carers. The training is delivered by the fostering service and in response to Covid 19, from summer 2020, it now takes place virtually. Connected persons foster carers are also invited to attend this training.

7.4 The service continues to support newly approved foster carers in completing the mandatory Training Support and Development Standards (TSD). There is an adapted version of these standards for connected persons foster carers and there is an expectation that any connected person carer completes this within 18 months of approval.

- 7.5 All foster carers approved by Walsall Council are provided with membership of the Fostering Network.
- 7.6 Foster carers can access support and advice out of hours via the Council's Emergency Duty Team (EDT). All foster carers have the contact details for EDT and reports from carers who have used the service are positive. Carers use the service to report significant events and to seek guidance. On occasions, social workers have visited carers' homes out of hours, most usually in response to children exhibiting disruptive behaviour.
- 7.7 Psychological support - the Fostering Service continues to make use of the regular consultation surgeries provided by Flash Service – the Tier 2/3 CAMHS service. The Hub Carers with the Mockingbird Service use this service to consult on the support they provide to the households in their hubs. Supervising Social Workers support foster carers to make use of the advice and support attendance by children requiring intervention.
- 7.8 During 2019/20 and up until August 2020, Walsall Foster Care Association (WFCA) provided support to carers through a variety of activities:
- Produced a quarterly Foster Carer Newsletter providing up to date and relevant information.
 - Offered a buddy scheme to carers
 - Assisted in recruitment activity
 - Supported carer training
 - Provided an Out of hours telephone support for foster carers
 - Ran coffee mornings and support groups
 - Participated with the service in developing and reviewing policies and procedures
 - Organised annual social activities

8. Fostering Panel

- 8.1 Chris Dennison and Lisa Cawthorn remained Chairs of the Fostering and Permanence Panel supported by Jan Toplis and Catherine Mitchley are Vice Chairs.
- 8.2 Fostering Panel business continues to be busy with the Panel meeting on 37 occasions. Panel was quorate on each occasion. The table below outlines the range of work discussed at Fostering Panel.



8.3 Up until December 2019, a dedicated, full time Panel Advisor took the lead on co-ordinating the recruitment, induction and annual appraisal of panel members. During 2019-20, they also arranged training days for panel members alongside facilitating their private study through sharing information from guidance and research with panel members. As part of the service redesign, the Panel Advisor post was deleted and aspects of the role has been built into the work of the 4 Team Managers within the Fostering Service.

8.4 The Panel provides the service with detailed feedback on the quality of the work discussed and has noted continued improvements in the quality of the work presented by members of the service. The Panel has, however, raised issues around the quality of connected persons assessment reports that have been externally commissioned. Feedback to the Panel from those attending continues to demonstrate that they experience a positive and welcoming meeting in which information is considered fairly.

9. Staying Put

9.1 The provision for 'Staying Put' has ensured that many young people are able to remain with their carers for a much longer period of time after their 18th Birthday. For the period 2019/20, 12 out of the 18 Staying Put arrangements were for internal foster carers, compared with 18 out of 20 for the previous year. This year has seen 20 young people and their carers accessing this opportunity. Though this reduces foster carers available for children and young people, it is important to ensure the offer of staying put is made to every young person in foster care.

10. Complaints, Allegations and Children Missing from Care

10.1 Complaints - during 2019/20, the fostering service received 5 complaints from a Prospective foster carer (1), Foster carers (3) and Grandparent (1). Of these

complaints, one was about lack of professionalism during the assessment process; two were about a lack of support and guidance to the foster carer; two related to communication issues, and clarity and sharing of information. All were resolved at Stage1.

10.2 There were seven allegations against Local Authority Foster Carers which is monitored under Regulation 36 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2011. Of these, three resulted in Section 47 enquiries being made. Following the allegations being submitted, six resulted in no further action being taken. The remaining continued fostering with additional monitoring. There have been no incidents of physical restraint were reported in 2019/20 and this is similar to 2018/19.

10.6 Notifiable events (Regulation 36, Schedule 7, Fostering Service Regulations 2011). There were a further 10 Notifiable Events. The majority (6) related 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.

11. The Impact of Covid 19

11.1 At the end of the period covered by this annual report, central government instituted the national lockdown measures as a result of the global Covid 19 pandemic. The long term impacts of this on the Fostering Service are yet to be determined.

11.2 However, to date there have been a number of areas in which the lockdown has affected the service and our foster carers. These include:

- Additional pressure on foster carers as children are spending more time at home and supporting children with online learning.
- Adjustment to undertaking many activities through virtual platforms, such as visits, reviews, meetings and Fostering Panel
- Foster carers have adjusted to changes to family time arrangements to enable children to see their families.
- Fostering sufficiency reduced as foster carers are unable to health vulnerabilities.

12. Service Priorities and Improvement – 2020/21

12.1 In view of the challenges above, there are a number of areas for service improvement that have taken place in 2020/21. They are:

- Implemented Fostering Service Redesign
- Change to office accommodation that brought about opportunity for all Teams in the Fostering Service to work from one building
- Reduced number and reliance on agency workers in the Fostering Service
- Improved consistency around Financial Assessment Meetings
- Improved communication with Foster Carers
- Undertook Foster Carer Survey (outturn due in March 2021)
- Resolved WFCAs arrangements

- Responded to Covid 19 (RAA & additional payments to Carers)
- Mockingbird Hubs remain compliant with the Fostering Networks Fidelity model
- Partnership working with Grandparents Plus
- Improving trend on number of Foster Carers being recruited (12/14)
- Secured agreement to introduce a Support and Stability Team
- Secured agreement to provide improved training offer to Foster Carers and employees
- Secured agreement to trial dedicated telephone support line for Foster Carers
- Introduced Case File Auditing
- Re-established Mockingbird Steering Group
- Established Action Plan to improve work into and out of Fostering Panel
- Working towards Performance Scorecard being in place for 1/4/21.
- Started Scoping Exercise for SGO Support (pre & post order)
- Relunched Recruitment & Retention Group
- Introduced Practice Improvement Group
- Secured agreement for increase Mockingbird Hubs from 3 to 6
- Secured agreement for slight uplift on allowances for Foster

12.2 Service priorities moving forward are

- Increase recruitment of foster carers from diverse backgrounds.
- Maximise the capacity of internal foster carers and increase the proportion of looked after children placed with internal foster carers
- Maintain an assertive and robust focus on marketing, recruitment and assessment of foster carers.
- Extend the range of in-house fostering provision
- Increase range of support that is available to foster carers

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