



Walsall Council

Fostering Service Annual Report

1 April 2017 – 31 March 2018



PROUD OF OUR PAST OUR PRESENT AND FOR OUR FUTURE

1. Overview

This report sets out the activity of the Fostering Service from 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2018. 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 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 allegations.

2. The structure of the fostering service.

The Fostering Service continues to be based at the offices at 106 Essington Road, Willenhall, during 2017/18 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 expressing interest in becoming foster carers or adopters. There is also a recruitment and promotions officer who 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 provide a duty service which ensures there is always someone available to deal with concerns or questions from foster carers. The team also completes permanence assessments and participates in annual foster carer reviews.

Fostering Reviewing Officer

Undertakes all reviews of foster carers and is involved in aspects of service development and the delivery of training.

3. Service Development – Update from 2016/2017

The service redesign introduced in 2016/17 continues to be embedded with the Service. Progress had been slower than expected especially in respect to ensuring the quality and timeliness of support to existing fostering households, recruitment of mainstream carers and the transition of family and friends carers to Special Guardianship Orders.

Specifically the following developments were progressed –

- The Mocking Bird model of household support and supervision was further investigated with agreement to adopt the model made. The plan included a launch in July 2018 with two hubs in operation by September 2018.
- A new allowance and fee structure was consulted on during 2017/18 and was successfully implemented in April. This fee structure has scope for the use of specialist carers.
- The undertaking SGO assessments by Supervising Social Workers in the Support and Development Team was tested with a number of recommendations on changes to permanency planning practice being identified including how the transition should be tracked by the Service and how best support plans could be considered and signed off in a timely way.
- A review of Fostering Reviewing Officer was undertaken. This review confirmed the short fall in capacity to complete the reviews on time and with a completed record that meets all regulatory requirements.
- Further changes made with Mosaic to ensure the data requirements are met along with a priority being given to using the Mosaic Users group to identify further changes required.
- Work with FCA has continued with the Service specifically their future role in the recruitment and support of fostering households. The outcome of the review will be fed in the service level agreement review scheduled for the November 2018.

4. Recruitment

Foster Carer Recruitment – National Picture

Fostering Network has now published their findings on the wider national context for foster carer recruitment. The number of new fostering families needed during 2017 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 2018, a further 8,100 fostering families are needed right across the UK, to give loving homes and supportive family environments to children. The need is for **6,800 foster families in England**, 550 in Scotland, 550 in Wales, and 200 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.

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

2018 Recruitment targets	Total
Northern Ireland	200
Wales	550
Scotland	550
England	6800
North East	450
North West	1240
Yorkshire and the Humber	720
East Midlands	500
West Midlands	890
East of England	610
London	930
South East	920
South West	540
TOTAL	8,100

Fostering Service Response

The responsibility for the marketing activity for the Fostering Service was transferred back to the Fostering Service (from Central Communications) in October 2015 with the appointment of a Recruitment & Promotions officer.

The Recruitment and Promotions officer provides and implements plans and promotional activities which assists in the recruitment and retention of foster carers. The recruitment strategy is outlined in the "Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention Strategy 2016-19".

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

During 2017/18, 33 public events in and around Walsall were held (including those during Foster Care Fortnight); this is a reduction from 49 events the previous year. Some events that had happened during 2016/17 did not happen in 2017/18; e.g. Council Summer fun days and Festive Markets. Attendance at specific information sessions declined, so these sessions were reduced to one per month. From events, 8 approaches were made, resulting in 4 enquiries/applications.

During 2017/18, the service has increased its use of social media including Facebook and Twitter for publicity purposes. This has included boosted Facebook posts and a netnatives campaign. From digital and online media, 51 approaches were made, resulting in 30 enquiries/applications.

Enquiry levels;

Fostering	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Enquiries	105	120	109	111	116	135
Offers	62	74	68	62	77	58
Initial visits	34	71	67	62	75	57
Approvals	8	9	17	18	21	13
Conversion rate	8%	7.5%	15.6%	16.2%	17.2%	9.6%

Following a number of years when our approvals have been increasing, there has been a significant reduction in initial visits and approvals in 2017/18. There has been a particular reduction in the number of foster carers transferring in from other fostering agencies (3 rather than 6). In part this was as a result of the process of revising our fostering fees and allowances during 2017/18, and as such were not able to guarantee what payments we would be making, may have been an issue effecting people's motivation to foster for Walsall.

With the new payments have been finalised, the higher fees paid to new carers should make Walsall a more attractive option to new carers. There is a risk that as we no longer pay the fee to carers when they don't have a placement, may make us less attractive to carers already approved by other agencies.

Total requests for information and enquiries;

Month	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
April	11	6	14	16	6	15
May	28	8	35	11	19	26
June	12	19	14	22	3	22
July	17	26	13	7	8	16
August	8	15	8	18	6	13
September	17	30	10	22	7	36
October	8	15	12	18	8	45
November	13	24	5	12	7	20
December	7	9	6	3	4	3
January	17	26	26	7	17	8
February	16	20	18	15	10	4
March	13	15	15	8	21	21
Total	167	213	176	159	116	254

The reduction in this number is due to a reduction in the number of people making contact information only. However, as the information is now readily available in electronic form, it could indicate that less information was sent out by post. Further analysis of digital enquiries will be undertaken in 2018/19.

Information requests and enquiries by source of marketing methods

	Word of mouth carer referrals	Word of mouth other	Event	Media – local & national	Other service publications	Posters & banners	Leaflets	Walsall Website	Google Search	Face book	Other	Total
14/15	41		27	3	4	0	1	91			9	176
15/16	16	17	2	2	3	0	0	18	88	1	2	159
16/17	13	17	24	11	3	3	6	26	55	49	13	220
17/18	8	12	8	8	2	1	5	119	24	51	16	254

We continue to pay £100 to the Foster Carer Association for all the foster carers that they (and the foster carers) help us recruit; this is currently being reviewed.

Of the 13 families approved, the source of their initial enquires was as follows Google (1), Internet (1), Word of Mouth (carer) (3), Word of Mouth (other) (1), Walsall website (4), Walsall employee/event (1) and Other (2). The previous year 3 carers transferred in with Walsall children already in placement; there was 1 last year.

5. Assessments and approvals

Of the assessments which led to the 13 approvals, 12 were undertaken by social workers in the Recruitment and Assessment team; 1 was commissioned from SWAN (an independent agency). The assessment undertaken from SWAN was commissioned in December 2016; no Mainstream assessments have been commissioned from SWAN (or another agency) since then. The average timescale of the recruitment process from receiving the prospective applicants offer, to panel date was 225 days; which is a significant improvement on last year's performance of 311 days. The timescale from beginning the assessment to presentation at panel was also down from 231 to 183 days.

The target of approving the majority of foster carers within 8 months was met; 9 out of the 13 met this timescale; in 2016-17 it was 10 out of 20 (excluding the Fostering to Adopt case).

Approvals

Type of carers	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18
Mainstream approvals	15	20	8	9	15	18	21	13
Mainstream de-reg & resignations	8	17	10	12	15	12	17	20
Mainstream gain/loss	+7	+5	-2	-3	0	+6	+4	-7
Short-Term Breaks (STB) approvals	2	2	0	0	2	0	0	0
STB de-reg & resignations		0	0	2	1	0	0	2
STB gain/loss	0	+2	0	-2	+1	0	0	-2
Overall gain/loss	+7	+7	-2	-5	+1	+6	+4	-9

Our campaign continues to remain inclusive, engaging all aspects of the community, but focusing of key target audiences when appropriate. The target for 2018-19 is to approve an additional 20 new mainstream foster carer households. On 1st April 2018 there were 14 families in assessment.

There were 20 mainstream resignations and de-registrations during the year. We now undertake exit questionnaires with foster carers which have been designed to capture the reasons for resignations. The following includes the reasons given (some have given more than 1 reason, which is why the total is more than 20); Resigned (10), Allegations & concerns (3), Family circumstances (5), Change of carer/not suited to fostering (2), Became Staying Put carer (1), Issues re policy, skills levels, payments (2), transferred to IFA (2).

The assessment of family and friends carers continues to be managed by the Team Manager and Assistant Team Manager of the Recruitment & Assessment Team. Three Connected Persons assessors undertake the majority of the Family & Friends fostering and Special

Guardianship assessments. Some assessments have been commissioned out, when the applicants live a significant distance from Walsall and when assessment demand is high. Some of these assessments have also been undertaken by members of the Mainstream Recruitment & Assessment Team.'

6. Training

Preparation and Assessment Courses

Year	Number of courses run	Number of Walsall Households trained	Number continuing into assessment	Number of carers approved
2009/10	12	21	19	16
2010/11	12	25	20	17
2011/12	3	16	12	22
2012/13	3	11	10	8
2013/14	5	19	17	9
2014/15	4	22	19	17
2015/16	3	18*	17	18
2016/17	3	17	16	21
2017/18	3	18	10	13

Whilst the Black Country Skills to Foster Training Consortium was re-established in January 2014, in practice we rarely send prospective carers to the training groups in the other local authorities; no carers were sent in 2017-18.

The preparation and assessment training 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.

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

Three skills to foster training courses were run in 2017 -18. In April/May 2017 eight households completed the training with four households completing in Sept/October and six households in January 2018. We do not expect foster carers who transfer in from another agency to repeat the Skills to Foster training with Walsall unless there has been a significant gap in their learning and development history.

Our assessments often start after the training, although sometimes we do start them prior to training if they are strong candidates. As our assessments usually take 231 days (which includes the 30 days needed to be completed prior to Fostering Panel) it is expected that many of the foster carers who were trained this year to be approved next year.

During 2015-16 we ran our first Skills to Foster training course for Family & Friends foster carers. In 2017-18 we once again ran 2 courses. This course is offered to carers following their approval as a foster carer, as 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 phase 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 that are 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 and the practical care of Muslim children.

These courses were also promoted to family and friends carers, and open to more longstanding carers who wish to refresh their skills/ knowledge.

Post Approval.

The foster carers training programme is designed to cover the areas outlined in the National Minimum Standards. A programme of induction workshops is provided for new carers by the Fostering Recruitment and Assessment team. The majority of foster carer training is managed by Central Workforce Development; this includes some courses delivered exclusively to foster carers, both mainstream, short breaks carers and family and friends. Alongside this there is a suite of 30 different online training courses provided by AC Education. 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.

The Solihull Approach course was first run for foster carers in the spring of 2016, and has been run on 5 occasions since. The course leaders are Fostering Team social workers and foster carers. The plan is to continue running this course twice a year.

On 31 March 2018, a total of 246 mainstream foster carers, 7 short breaks carers and 12 family & friends carers had completed the Training Support and Development Standards.

7. Short term break scheme

Short Breaks carers provide regular stimulating breaks for young people away from their home; usually one weekend per month. The carers 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 2018 Walsall Short Term Breaks Scheme had 5 families providing a service to 7 children and young people.

The Complex Needs & Short Breaks Panel meets once a month; this is attended by a representative 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.

8. 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 on the electronic system 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 2017/18 the percentage of unannounced visits completed on time has remains high with over 90%. 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.

WFCA coordinated a trip to Weston-Super-Mare for foster carers in September 2017, 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 200 people enjoyed the day. It was funded by the fostering service with match funding from private providers. They also held a themed party for Looked After Children between 0-10years in June 2017. There was also an event held for children age 11 plus. These events provide a 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. Walsall FCA also hosted the annual Christmas party in December 2017 which was well attended.

Another aspect of foster carer support is the annual foster carer review process. The reviews are independently chaired by the Fostering Reviewing Officer. 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.

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 Duty Team (EDT). All foster carers have the contact details for EDT 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 carers' homes out of hours, most usually in response to children exhibiting disruptive behaviour.

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.

9. 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.

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.

The permanency Co-ordinator post was created in 2016 to track and monitor all permanency plans. All children with a care plan of long term fostering, Adoption and SGO plans are monitored in respect to timeliness and to prevent delays for our looked after children. The full time post for SGO post order support has also supported families in progressing SGO as a permanency option with the confidence that this support will be offered after the Order is granted. In 2017-18 34 SGO 's were granted, of this over 90% of the children were previously looked after. Walsall are also involved in Grandparents Plus a national organisation which has now developed regionally within the West Midlands (They provide support for SGO carers and their families) they also provide workshops and activity days for this cohort of families. This post order support has increased the numbers of applicants considering SGO as a permanency plans, compared to the previous year 2016/17, where 25 Special guardianship Orders were granted.

10. 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. 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 & friends foster carers in their newsletter funded by the Family Placement Services.

Despite the creation of three assessment posts in the Service to work with Children's Social Workers to complete initial viability assessments and full assessments of family and friends the Service had continued to outsource some of the assessments in order to meet court timescales. As result of revisions in practice, recruitment of staff who have both safeguarding and fostering experience and improved management oversight this practice ended in June 2018.

On 31 March 2018 there were 82 Family and Friends carer households caring for 123 children and young people.

11. Placement and Resources Team

The Placement and Resources Team commissions all external fostering and residential placements, when our internal provisions are exhausted or not available. The service will approach Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) usually in line with the regional framework 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. 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.

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 20 young people and their carers accessing this opportunity. However, this does result in less placement availability for new children and young people. For the period 2017/18, 20 out of the 23 Staying Put arrangements were for internal foster carers, which is a similar figure for last year. Although this represents a challenge around managing the availability of fostering places it remains important to ensure offer of staying put is made to every young person in foster care.

The breakdown for placements as at the 31 March 2018 was as follows:

Placements

Year	Temporary	Permanent	Family friends and	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
16/17	126	68	129	7	330
17/18	141	75	123	7	346

(As of March 31st there 308 children looked after within internal fostering service- there were 28 vacant places within the Service and 36 places on hold for either reasons related to the carer or decisions pending the Local Authority)

On 31.3.18 there were 636 children Looked After which was a decrease of 6 from the previous year's number of 642.

12. Complaints, Allegations and Children Missing from Care

During 2017/18, the fostering service received 9 complaints from the following sources:

Children	2
Foster carers	4
Foster carers relative	1
Grandparent	1
Prospective foster carers	1

Of these complaints, 2 were by children about the finances used by the foster carers, 2 were about the placement of children, 4 were about a lack of support to foster carers and one was about why their enquiry was not pursued. All of which have been resolve.

Allegations

There were 17 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 12 Emotional 3 and Neglect 2. Of these, 2 resulted in child protection investigations being instigated. As a result of the allegations, 12 resulted in no further action being taken. Of the remaining 5, 3 continued fostering with additional monitoring and 2 were referred to the Fostering panel to have their approval reviewed.

Missing from care

From the population of children in care as of March 31 2018, 11 children had been reported missing from care on a total of 57 occasions. This compares with previous year when 14 children went missing on 78 occasions.

Incidents of Physical Restraint

No incidents of Physical Restraint were reported in 2017/18 similar to 2016/17.

Regulation 36, Schedule 7 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2011

As well as the allegations, there were a further 12 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 4 minor accidents or illness ,7 missing from care, and 1 serious complaint about a foster carer.

13. Fostering Panel Analysis

Central Membership April 2017 – March 2018;

Chris Dennison	(Chair)
Jan Toplis	(Vice Chair/Independent/Social Worker)

Catherine Mitchley	(Vice Chair/Independent)
Sue Partoon	(Vice Chair/Independent)
Carol Moore	(Vice Chair/Social Worker/Independent)
Surinder Kumari	(Independent/Social Worker)
Deloris Walker	(Independent)
Bob Heighway	(Independent)
Alan Paul	(Independent)
Ann Burford	(Independent)
Balbir Kandola	(Independent)
Ruth Cherrington	(Independent)
Sharon Thompson	(Independent)
Councillor Amers Kudhail	(Independent)
Kim O'Shea	(Social Worker)
Nicitta Hanley	(Independent/Ex LAC)
Kimberley Hull	(Independent/Ex LAC)
Maxwell Gregory	(Interim Social Worker)

There were ten member appraisals undertaken.

Panel Business

- 34 Panels.
- 13 Mainstream foster carers approved.
- 29 Connected persons/family & friends foster carers approved.
- 27 reviews presented to foster panel.
- 1 mainstream foster carers had their approval terminated.
- 2 mainstream foster carers resigned.
- 2 family and friends foster carer had their approval terminated.
- 1 family and friend foster carers resigned.
- 1 family and friends foster carers resigned as the children they were caring for were made subject to SGO.
- 10 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.

Panel Administration: The panel has been supported by Irene Feledziak, Rebecka Evans and Rebecca Deakin.

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. Below is summary of the feedback provided by the Independent Chair of the Panel.:

- 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 at times not be consistent to the main body of the report.
- Uncertainty in how best to present 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
- Long 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

It should the comments in the main are relating to the external assessments of family and friends and in particular tow of the assessors the organisations had used. This has been addressed by the service by bringing 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 carer and a care leaver to join the fostering panel. It is hoped that by increasing central list membership in this way that recommendations are made from a multi-agency perspective.

Training

A Fostering standards workshop was held on 8th May 2017.

A full days training was due 24th October 2016 for Mocking Bird but was rescheduled to 12th April 2018.

Panel are updated regularly on legislation, good practice and Walsall Council procedure as part of the standing agenda for the Panel.

14. Financial Context

As at March 2018, the service currently supported 185 Looked after Children within internal fostering placements and a further 123 in family and friend placements. For 2017/18 the total cost of supporting both placement settings was £5.083m, at an average cost of £297 p/wk.

The cost of supporting all Looked after Children across the range of placement settings for 2017/18 was £ 20.791m with the majority of the expenditure associated with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) or complex external residential placements. During 2017/18, Children's services reported an ongoing financial pressure associated with the number and mix of Looked after Children. As part of the 2018/19 budget agreed by Full Council, corporate investment was allocated to Children's services to ensure budget was aligned with 2017/18 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. This is being monitored as part of the Authority's transformation agenda.

15. Future Service Delivery

In view of the challenges above, there are a number of areas for service development for the coming year. They are as follows:

- Further rollout of Mockingbird with further two hubs developed and in place.
- Further service design changes in light of the review of the annual foster carers reviews process and undertaking of kinship assessment and SGO assessments.
- Development of additional specialist schemes in respect to adolescents who are on the edge of or in residential care and parent and child fostering schemes.
- Continued development of the data base and the recording processes and the introduction of customer management solutions that will enable better use of the information arising from potential applicants searching on line – website of the face book page.
- Review of the service agreement with the FCA.

Author:

Elizabeth Gosling, Group Manager Provider Services
Linda Franks, Professional Panel Advisor