

Personnel Committee – 24th April 2023

Update on Promotional & Recruitment Activity in the Fostering Service

1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1 To provide the Personnel Committee with an update on the on work undertaken to date in respect of Walsall being a Foster Friendly Council and whether this has resulted in any Expressions of Interest in becoming a Foster Carer.

2. Recommendations

Personnel Committee is recommended to endorse: -

- a) The Fostering Friendly Employer status and policy being promoted with all Council Employees
- b) The Fostering Friendly Policy being part of the Corporate Induction
- c) The Fostering Friendly Policy being promoted with other Employers in the Borough.
- d) The Fostering Friendly Policy being kept under review so that our offer to current and prospective Foster Carers remains competitive.

3. Background: Foster Carer Recruitment & Retention – National, Regional and Local Context

- 3.1 Foster Carers are assessed and approved as either Mainstream or Connected Foster Carer. A Connected Foster Carer relates to those households who offer to provide care to a child known to them, usually a relative. Mainstream Foster Carers are assessed and approved to care for children not known to them. Mainstream Foster Carers include those offering both long-and short-term care and those who provide respite care.
- 3.2 Walsall's Fostering Service is operating in a highly competitive marketplace, which has seen an exponential growth of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs). IFAs operate on a national and local basis actively seeking to recruit experienced and potential foster carers from across Walsall and surrounding areas. They offer higher financial rewards, other recruitment and retention incentives, one example being a retainer fee.
- 3.3 The final report on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2021) noted that in 2020/21:

Recruitment and retention among independent fostering agency services led to a net increase in capacity of 525 additional households and 765 additional foster care places. In contrast, there has been a decrease in capacity of 35 households and 325 places in local authorities over the same period (Ofsted 2021b).

3.4 Recruitment of new Foster Carers continues to be a significant challenge nationally. A recent report by Ofsted (2022) on Fostering notes that the number of available fostering places in England has fallen by almost a quarter in four years. In addition, the number of approved foster carers also dropped as more Foster Carers have left the sector. The Ofsted report notes:

- *Whilst the number of initial inquiries from prospective fosterers rose nationally by 18%, to 138,075 inquiries in the latest year, just 6% went on to apply (down from 9% in 2017-18).*
- *There were 8,280 applications to become a foster carer – the lowest number in several years and down 21% from 2017-18 and more Mainstream Fostering Households deregistered than were approved (5,435 versus 4,035), leading to a decrease in fostering capacity nationally.*

3.5 In December 2022, following consultation with relevant parties, Walsall Council amended the Family Friendly Policy and this has brought about an improved offer of support for Foster Carers. This change to the policy also helped the Council obtain Fostering Friendly Employer Status from the leading fostering charity, the Fostering Network. The policy notes that:

The council recognises and values the contribution that foster carers make to the lives of children and young people in care. We understand that foster carers will need some flexibility in their working arrangements in order that they can meet the needs of their fostered child or young person. The council is committed to support any staff member who is a foster carer or approved kinship carer. We will do this, wherever possible, by creating a fostering friendly organisation that offers flexible working arrangements which respond to the needs of all staff who are foster carers or approved kinship carers.'

Recruitment & Retention of Approved Foster Carers

3.6 The application and assessment journey often takes six months to complete and follows the steps set out below. Some of the steps above can run concurrently

- **Initial Enquiry** – Applicant makes contact. Fostering Service completes an Initial Enquiry.
- **Initial Visit** - A social worker undertakes home visit
- **Skills to Foster' Preparation Course** - Applicant attends the Skills to Foster' preparation course.
- **Assessment** - A social worker begins the assessment.
- **Fostering Panel** - The prospective foster carer attends with their social worker.

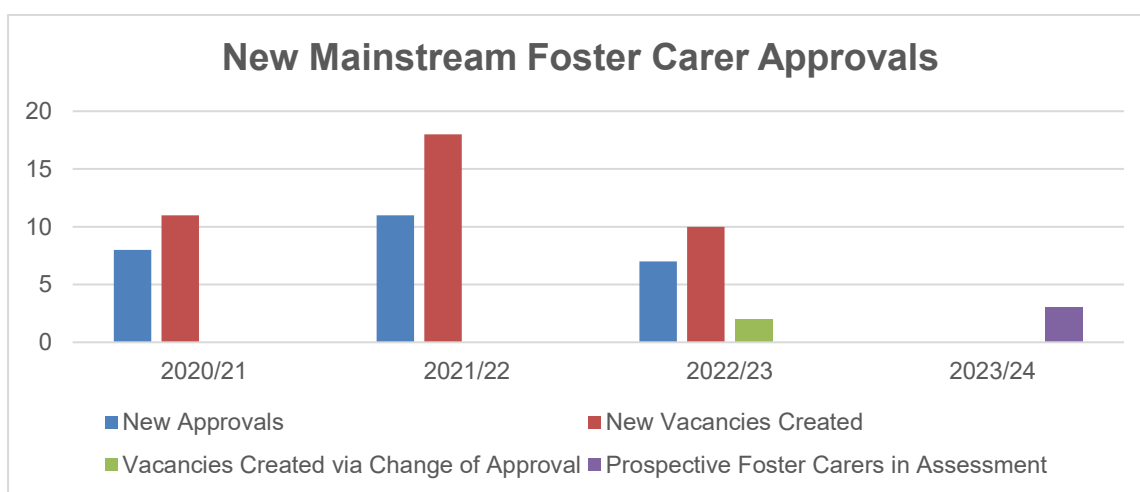
- **Recommendation** – Fostering Panel make a recommendation about whether applicant should be approved as a foster carer.
- **Agency Decision Maker (ADM)** – Walsall's ADM decides whether you are approved as a foster carer.
- **Approval** - Foster carer I support to welcome their first child.

3.7 On 21st March 2023 there were:

- 106 Mainstream Fostering Households
- 76 Connected Fostering Households
- 2 Foster For Adoption Households

3.8 The Fostering Service set themselves the following recruitment target for Mainstream Foster Carers:

- 2022/23: 14 households with 18 beds
- 2023/24: 20 households with 25 beds
- 2024/25: 25 households with 30 beds



3.9 As noted elsewhere in this report, there are significant challenges to the recruitment of Mainstream Foster Carer. For 2022/23, the Fostering Service set a target to recruit, assess and approve **14** new mainstream fostering households in 2022/23. By 31st March 2023, **7** new fostering households will have been approved and this creates **10** new vacancies for our Children in Care to live with a Walsall Foster Carer. Due to personal reasons or concerns that emerged during assessment, **14** prospective fostering households either opted out or were ruled out of the assessment process; a small cohort opted out after the Fostering Service had completed a positive assessment of them.

3.10 To monitor the progress of assessments and help understand the narrative and personal circumstances of each applicant, in 2022/23, the Recruitment &

Assessment Team introduced and Recruitment Pipeline Tracking Document which is reviewed on a fortnightly basis with the Group Manager.

- 3.11 In addition to the **10** new vacancies created so far through the recruitment to new Mainstream Foster Carers, a further **2** vacancies have been created by changing the approval status of exiting Foster Carers. For 2023/24, currently, there are **3** prospective fostering households being assessed.
- 3.12 With regard to the impact the promotional activity has had on Walsall Council employees being assessed as Foster Carers, although **3** employees expressed an interest earlier this year, as yet they have not opted to progress this with the Fostering Service. Whilst the efforts to recruit foster carers from the wider workforce is yet to yield any positive results, what is understood about foster carer recruitment is that the decision to commence the assessment is often arrived at after a long period of deliberation which is often prompted by an advert, a news article, a TV programme or conversations with family and friends about fostering.
- 3.13 The Fostering Service have set a stretching targets and striving to achieve these and however, balancing the need to recruit new mainstream foster carers against the changing personal circumstances, impact life events and doubts about becoming Foster Carers is an activity that is understandably applicant led which requires skilled social work support and management oversight.

Promotional & Recruitment Activity

- 3.14 Prior to the activity in January 2023, an overview of the branding used for the Fostering Service provided insight that whilst in the longer term a rebrand is required, as the brand is currently known and reflected on campaign materials and assets and has recently been used to advertise on Walsall Council's waste collection vehicles, it made sense to continue by raising awareness using the existing branding. In the short term however, with the help of colleagues in the Marketing and Communications Service, some work has been completed to sharpen up the font and the development of straplines, hierarchy of messaging and general layout to ensure maximum impact is gained from the current look and feel.
- 3.15 Timed to coincide with and celebrate the news that Walsall Council became an accredited Fostering Friendly Employer in December 2022, throughout January 2023, the Fostering Service undertook a range of promotional activity to target the whole Council workforce to attract staff to a career in fostering. Some activities were supported by Lead Member, Councillor Elson, Executive Director, Sally Rowe and Director for Children's Social Work, Colleen Male. Activities completed were:
- A slide deck for Directors to use in their briefings to their respective services
 - Fostering Friendly Information included on Inside Walsall
 - The creation of a Fostering TEAMS background
 - Use of Social Media Platforms to promote activity and events
 - Two face to face events held at the Bistro in the Civic Centre
 - A Face-to-Face event at Bloxwich Leisure Centre

- A Face-to-Face event at Oak Park Leisure Centre
- A Face-to-Face event at Streetly Library
- A Face-to-Face event at Walsall Art Gallery
- Fostering Service 'Takeover' of Inside Walsall
- Article/ Advert run in Express & Star newspaper
- Face to face event at the Clean & Green Depot
- Face to face event at Walsall Expo (Walsall college)
- Contacted close to 30 people who had previously expressed an interest in fostering but had not progressed this beyond an expression of interest. In our correspondence to them, we told them about the significant changes we have made to support our foster care since they expressed an interest. From this piece of work, one applicant is now reengaged in the assessment process.

Planned Work 2023/24:

- 3.16 Walsall Fostering Service will make continued efforts to maintain a presence across the Council to encourage Walsall Council Employees to consider fostering.
- 3.17 The Fostering Service will work with large business across Walsall to encourage them to seek Foster Friendly accreditation and to undertake promotional work within these companies. We are currently in communication with both Walsall Health Trust and Walsall Housing Group as well as the other employers and businesses in the Borough.
- 3.18 The Fostering Service are updating the Marketing Plan & Communication Plan for 2023/24 – This will be used to inform our targeted marketing activities which will include:
 - Paid social media adverts
 - Inclusion of Fostering leaflet in all letters for Council Tax Bills
 - Radio Campaign (to coincide with Fostering Fortnight – May 2023)
 - Lamppost Banners across Walsall
 - Placing physical advertising boards on local traffic roundabouts
 - Monthly face to face events at The Bistro, Civic Centre
 - Monthly face to face events at local libraries
 - Face to Face event at Walsall Art Gallery in March 2023
 - Fostering Takeover of Inside Walsall (to coincide with Fostering Fortnight)
 - Article/ Advert run in Express & Star newspaper (to coincide with Fostering Fortnight)
 - Foster Carer 'Thank You' Event (to coincide with Fostering Fortnight)
 - Face to face events at local Supermarkets (awaiting confirmation)
 - Walsall Pride (August 2023)
 - Exploring how we can weave being a FFE into new employee inductions

4. Financial

- 4.1 Recruiting and retaining Walsall Council Foster Carers avoids the additional costs associated with our Children in Care living with foster carers who are approved with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs). IAlso, as IFA foster carers do not

always live in Walsall, this potentially creates more opportunities for our Children in Care to live and grow up in Walsall, meaning that its easier for them to spend time with family and friends and continue their education at a local school.

- 4.2 The final report on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2021) noted that *'there is a growing crisis in foster care recruitment . . . without major action, we expect that fostering will face the same acute market issues as residential care in the near future'*
- 4.3 Whilst the fostering market has different risks to the children's home market, fostering is on the same trajectory of becoming increasingly privatised and consolidated in the hands of a few large providers (CMA, 2022). The market share of independent fostering agencies (IFAs) is 41%, and the top six IFAs account for 51% of all foster homes (Ofsted, 2020). The Competition and Markets Authority highlighted the scale of high cost and profiteering in the children's social care market:

In fostering, prices have been steady at an average of £820 per week, and indeed have therefore declined in real terms, but profit margins of the largest IFAs appear consistently high at an average of 19.4%" (Competition and Markets Authority, 2022)

5. Legal

- 5.1 The Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) for Policies, Procedures and Services was reviewed in December 2022. With regards to foster carers, the revised Family Friendly Policy introduced paid time off for foster carers. The policy goes on to note that:

'As a modern and caring employer, which looks to attract people to work from across our communities, and supports the corporate parenting responsibility given to the local authority . . . The foster care leave section includes up to 5 days paid leave for attending training and assessments before being approved as a foster carer. This mirrors the adoption procedure where 5 days paid leave is given to attend the adoption preparation course. Following the initial assessment, once they are registered as foster carer with a placement the procedure allows up to 5 days paid leave per year. From benchmarking this is within the range offered by other local authorities (between 3 and 10 days) and is the most common allowance from those benchmarked.'

6. Risk Management

- 6.1 N/A.

7. People

- 7.1 With regards to the wider workforce, as of 31 March 2022 the total number of Walsall Council employees (excluding Schools) were 2998. The Council's workforce is made up of 66.94% females. 21.68% of the workforce are classified as under-represented ethnic groups (i.e. those excluding White British ethnicity).
- 7.2 In total there were 133 employees (4.44% of the workforce) who declared they had a disability, as defined by the Equality Act 2010. Of Walsall Council employees 3.20% are in the age group under 25, 24.35% in age group 25-39, 24.72% are in the age group 40-49, 44.09% are in the age group 50-64, and 3.64% are in the age group 65 and over.

8. Consultation

- 8.1 Consultation on the amendments to the Family Friendly Policy took place between 2 and 11 November 2022 with senior managers and trade unions colleagues. Feedback on the changes from senior managers has all been positive with no issues being raised. Feedback from trade union colleagues raised no issues or comments that needed addressing.

9. Closing Comments:

- 9.1 Although initially, there was some interest from employees about becoming a foster carers, as yet there are no employees in the pipeline for assessment.

As noted at paragraph 3.12, this is not unusual and lengthy deliberations are often a common feature of people's journey into fostering. The low uptake should not be interpreted to mean achieving Fostering Friendly Employer Status was the wrong strategic decision. Whilst disappointing, as our improved offer to foster carers is in its infancy, we hope to see the benefits of our work and this initiative in 2023/24.

Author

Mark Burrows
Group Manager
mark.burrows@walsall.gov.uk