

Walsall Fostering Service Annual Report 2024-2025
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1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 This report summarises the activity of the Fostering Service from 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025.
- 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 a child in our care, it is preferable that they live within a family setting. It is the aim of the council that wherever possible this will be with foster carer/s approved by Walsall rather than through commissioning an external home. 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 Fostering service 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 living within fostering homes are well cared for and achieve good outcomes.
- 1.4 Fostering homes are referred to as either Mainstream or Connected Persons. Connected persons fostering refers to those households who 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 Foster Carers can be approved to care for between 1 and 3 children at a time and can care for children of different ages.
- 1.5 Walsall Fostering Service is located within the Children's Services Directorate of Walsall Council. The aim of the Fostering Service is to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of registered foster carers who can meet the needs of children. Fostering and family-based care are our first-choice option for the Children in Care of Walsall.
- 1.6 The Fostering Service is managed by the Group Manager, and they report to the Head of Service for Provider Services. The primary objective for role of Group Manager is the responsibility for the service planning and management of all local authority Fostering Services.
- 1.7 There are 6 teams in the Fostering Service. Whilst they cover different areas of the fostering task, the overall purpose is to assess, support and develop foster carers and special guardians and to help secure permanency for children via long-term fostering and special guardianship. The Teams are:
 - Recruitment & Assessment
 - Support & Stability (based in R&A Team)

- Support & Development 1
- Support & Development 2 (Mockingbird)
- Connected Persons
- SGO Support Hub (based in CP Team)

1.8 Also working across the service is a Practice Improvement Manager and an Independent Fostering Reviewing Officer. The Practice Improvement Manager takes responsibility for the arrangements and operation of the Fostering Panel.

1.9 During this reporting period, the Fostering Service recruited to the following new posts:

- Training & Development Officer
- 1 x additional Customer Service Officer to improve capacity to respond to prospective foster carers enquiries and increase promotional activity

2. Overview of Achievements in 2024/25

- Sustained workforce stability – there are no agency workers in the Fostering Service
- Maintained the Foster Carer Out of Hours Telephone Support Line
- Increased weekly fostering fees and allowances by 4%
- Held ‘Thank You’ events for Foster Carers and Kinship Carers
- Organised and facilitated a Celebration Event for Black History Month
- Collaborated with other LAs to produce the film ‘Everything’
- Increased the number of approaches from prospective fostering households
- Recruited, assessed and approved **19** Mainstream Fostering Households
- Assessed and approved **18** Connected Fostering Households
- Foster Panel rated all work to be Good or Outstanding
- All Case File Audits were rated to be Good or Outstanding
- Completed first refresh of the Foster for Walsall Website
- Continued our partnership working arrangements with the charity Kinship
- Securing permanence for children through SGO
- Maintained the quality & timeliness of connected person assessments
- Continued our journey for Foster Carers to access Foundation to Attachment Training
- Continued to produce regular newsletters to both Foster Carers and SGO Carers

2.1 Recruitment & Retention of Foster Carers – Local & National Picture:

2.2 Walsall’s foster carers are assessed and approved as either mainstream or connected foster carers. A connected foster carer relates to those households who offer to provide care to a child known to them, usually a relative and are approved solely by Local Authorities. The foster carers in this category sometimes go on to become mainstream carers, but not frequently. 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.

2.3 On 31st March 2025 there were:

- 100 Mainstream Fostering Households
- 63 Connected Fostering Households (includes Reg.24 arrangements)
- 0 Foster for Adoption Households

2.4 In 2024/25, **19** new fostering households were approved, increasing sufficiency for up to 25 children (in some households for up to 2 children is siblings). In addition to the 19 new mainstream fostering households, one other mainstream foster carer was also assessed and approved. The Fostering Service did not include this foster carer in the figures though as this related to succession planning – the new foster carer is the daughter of an existing foster carer and she will take over the role when her mother retires.

2.5 **14** mainstream households left the service. Further details on this are set out at paragraph 5.1.

2.6 Walsall's Fostering Service continues to operate in a highly competitive marketplace and the recruitment & retention of mainstream foster carers continues to be a significant challenge, both nationally and locally.

National Context

2.7 The recent statistical report on fostering by Ofsted which covers the reporting period of 2023/24, noted the following main findings:

- The number of mainstream fostering households has decreased
- There is a continuing upward trend in the number of family and friends households
- The use of IFAs for mainstream foster care is increasing.
- The number of applications for mainstream fostering has increased since last year
- The year-on-year decrease in newly approved mainstream households seen in recent years has slowed down.

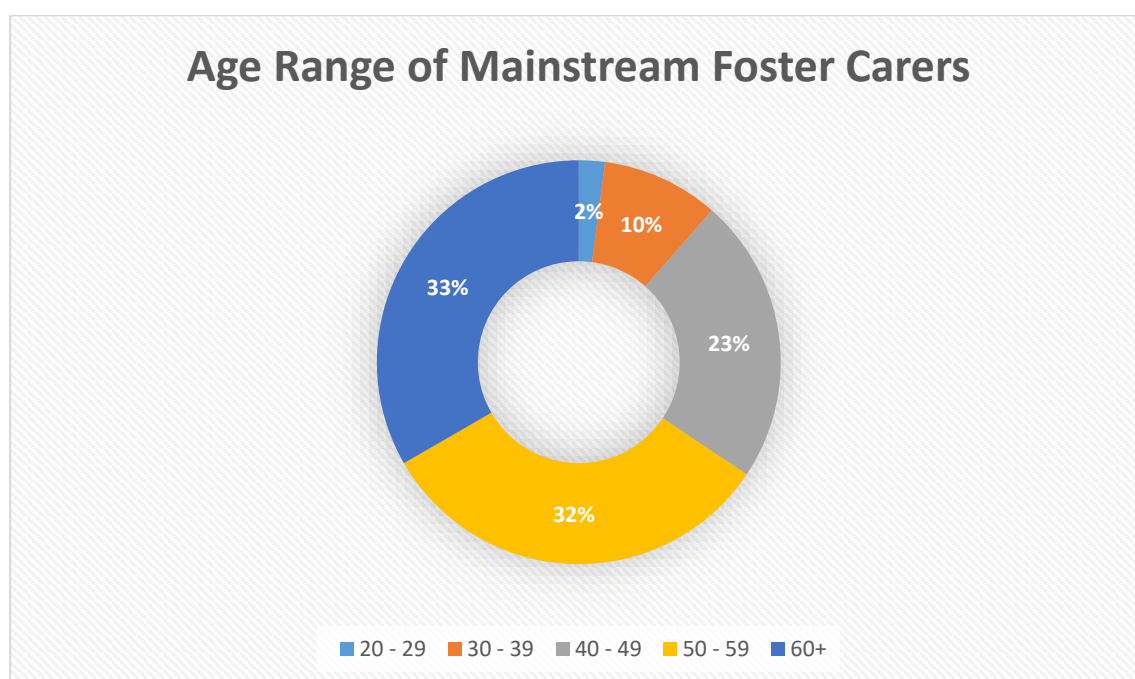
2.8 According to Ofsted, as of March 2024, nationally there were 57,065 approved mainstream foster carers. 'there has been a **5%** decrease in the number of mainstream LA households, and a **2%** decrease in the number of IFA households.' Of these, 11% were approved during the year. The report also notes that there has been an increase in family and friends households (sometimes known as kinship foster care) accounted for **21%** of all active fostering households, an increase from 16% in 2020.

2.9 Of the new approvals, LA carers account for **45%** and IFA carers account for **55%**. The proportion of newly approved LA mainstream carers is lower than the proportion of all LA mainstream foster carers (56%) active in March 2024. In the LA sector, the total number of approved mainstream carers has decreased by 15% since 2020. It was reported that 'the IFA sector now accounts for 44% of

mainstream fostering households, up from 41% in 2020. IFAs now account for 48% of all filled mainstream fostering places.’ Ofsted noted that nationally, over the last year.

2.10 The Ofsted survey also noted that the population of foster carers in the UK is ageing . . . ‘Of those who responded to our survey in 2024, only 15% were aged 25–44, with 27% were aged 45–54. In contrast, the largest proportion of respondents (44%) were aged 55–64, up from 41%, and a further 12% were aged 65–74, up from 10%.

2.11 The chart below shows the age range of Foster Carers and illustrates the need to recruit the next generation of mainstream foster carers to ensure sufficiency for foster homes in the future. **33%** of mainstream foster carers are aged 60+ of which, 16 foster carers are aged 60-64 and 6 foster carers are aged 70-75. With regards to the age range of the 19 newly approved fostering households, the most approved are in the 40-49 age range.



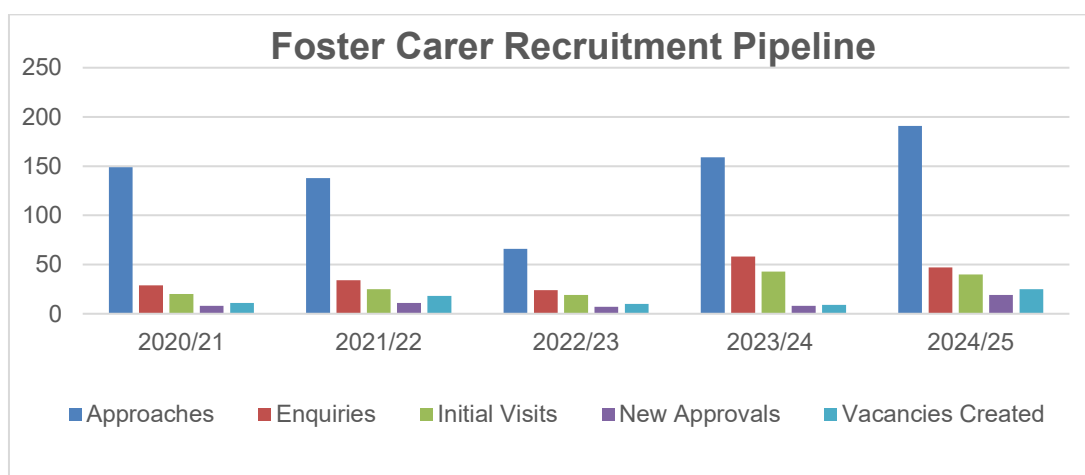
2.12 A further challenge to the sufficiency of internal Foster Care Homes is when our Foster Carers go on to secure a Special Guardianship Order or Adoption Order for a child(ren) who they have cared for as a Foster Carer. Albeit a positive outcome for our Children in Care, this impacts on the number of available homes for children.

3. Recruitment of Mainstream Foster Carers – Walsall

3.1 Fostering recruitment will need to target carers who are able to care for a range of children requiring foster homes. This is particularly necessary in order to increase choices for adolescents, large sibling groups and children who are able to step across from residential homes.

3.2 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 quite commonly, conversations with family and friends about fostering. Balancing the need to recruit new mainstream foster carers against their changing personal circumstances, impact of 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.

3.3 The table below sets out Walsall’s Foster Carer Recruitment Pipeline. The total number of approaches is higher than the previous year . The number of enquiries and home visits for 2024/25 are similar to the previous year. Importantly though, the number of newly approved fostering households is significantly higher, with **19** being approved in 2024/25. This represents a conversion rate from enquiry to approval of **40%** which is a significant increase on the **15%** in 2023/24.



3.4 With regards to vacancies created, this is the maximum number which is based on foster carer approvals and matching preferences. Some foster carers may have an approval for 2 children, but only if they are part of a sibling group. Therefore, if one vacancy becomes filled, the other vacancy is unlikely to be used, unless that is for the child’s sibling. Where appropriate capacity within a fostering household is reviewed and varied to reflect the capacity of that household through the annual review process.

3.5 To monitor the progress of assessments and help understand the narrative and personal circumstances of each applicant, the Recruitment & Assessment Team use the Recruitment Pipeline Tracking Document which is reviewed on a monthly basis with the Head of Service, Group Manager and a Finance Business Partner. Work is underway with colleagues from Business Insights to develop a Recruitment Dashboard. Whilst much of this information is already available via PowerBi, the planned work will allow for performance indicators to be factored in, which will then offer an improved performance and insight into this activity.

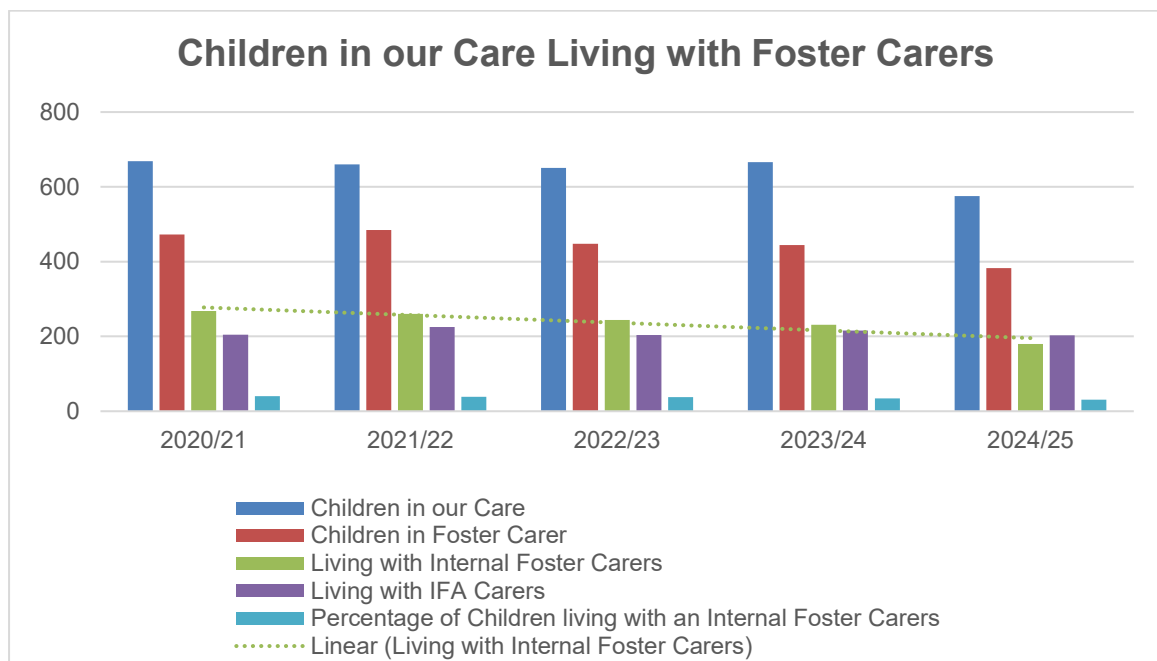
3.6 In 2024/25, **26** prospective mainstream fostering households withdrew or were withdrawn from the assessment process. Of the 26 withdrawn applications, **20** were withdrawn by the applicant and **6** were ended/ withdrawn by the service.

4. Walsall Children Living with Foster Carers

4.1 At the end of March 2025 there were **578** Children in our Care (CIOC) ; this is a reduction of **13.5%** on the previous year when there were **665** CIOC.

4.2 Of the 578 CiOC, **393 (68%)** were living with Foster Carers, of which, **180 (31%)** were living with Walsall Foster Carers at March 2025 compared with **231 (34.5%)** at the end of March 2024. This is a reduction.

4.3 As for CIOC living with an IFA Foster Carer, on 31/3/25, there were **203 (35%)** children living with an independent fostering agency (IFA) Foster Carer. This is decrease from **216** in 2023/24.

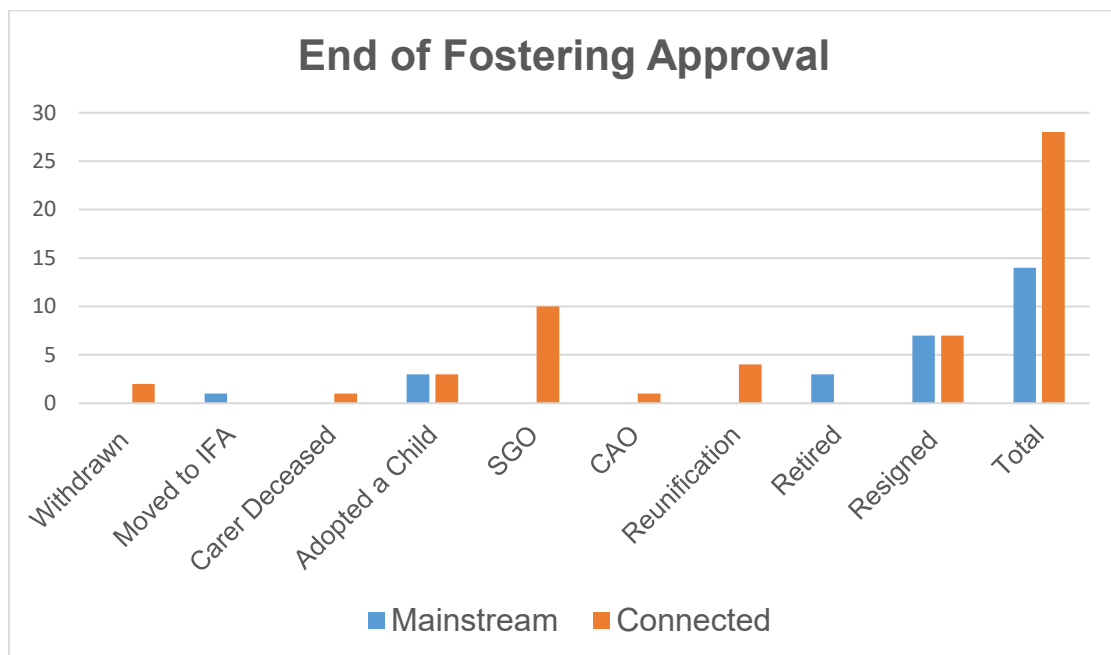


5. End of Foster Carer Approval:

5.1 There are a wide range of reasons as to why a Foster Carer’s approval ends. These can range from their fostering career naturally coming to end, a change to family circumstances, concerns about the ongoing suitability, moving to become a Special Guardian and of course transferring to an IFA.

5.2 The total number of approvals ending in 2024/25 is set out in the table below; this includes both Mainstream and Connected Foster Carers. In total, **42** fostering household ended their fostering careers, **14** were Mainstream Households and **28** were Connected Households. See table below.

- 5.3 Of the 28 deregistration for connected households, permanence was secured for 18 of these either through adoption, CAO, SGO or reunification to birth parents. 2 households resigned once the child they were caring for reached 18 and the service recommend 2 households were deregistered. Other reasons for deregistration were when carer experienced a change in the circumstances.
- 5.4 Of the 14 deregistration for mainstream connected households' permanence was secured in 3 households when they adopted a child. 1 ended their fostering career as the child they were caring for turned 18 and 1 fostering households transferred to an IFA. 4 households retired at the end of their fostering career and 1 household retired on ill health grounds. The fostering service recommended 2 households be deregistered and 2 households resigned due to a change in their circumstances/ impact of fostering on their family.
- 5.5 In terms of the retention of Mainstream Foster Carers, a previous area of concern was the number of Walsall Foster Carers transferring to an Independent Fostering Agency. In the previous 6 years, 6 Foster Carers have opted to transfer. There was only 1 fostering household that opted to transfer in 2024/25 did so for financial reasons.



6. Connected Foster Care

- 6.1 The role connected fostering households plays in overall 'placement sufficiency' is important as this offers children an opportunity to remain in the care of their wider families. Connected fostering households undergo the same assessment and approval process as mainstream fostering households. If approved, they require support and supervision from an allocated Supervising Social Worker. Whilst it is not always the case, it can be that due to the ongoing connections the connected carers have to the children's birth family, it is not unusual for them to require more support than a newly approved mainstream foster carer.

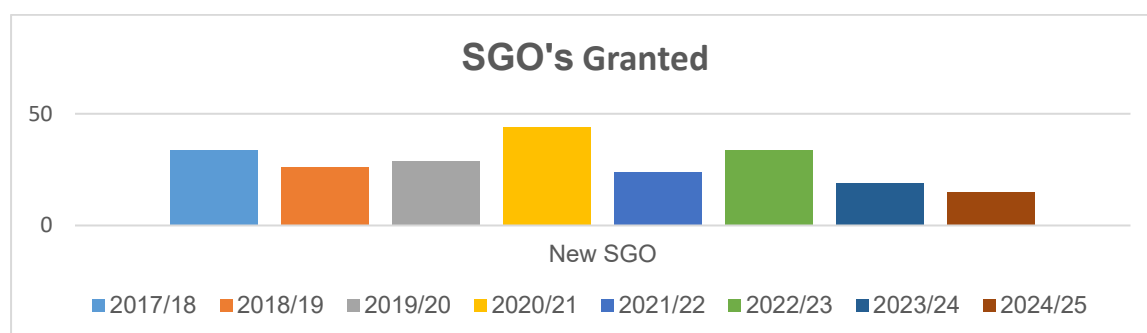
- 6.2 As of 31st March 2025, there were **58** approved Connected Households caring for Children in our Care. Of the 58, **18** were approved in 2024/25 and of the 18, **13** are still approved foster carers with Walsall. There are also **5** temporary approved fostering households under a Regulation 24 arrangement. Therefore, as of 31st March 2025, there were **63** Connected Households caring for **88** children in our Care. Whilst the number of new approvals is similar to the previous year (**19**), the total number of approved Connected Households at year end is **11** fewer than on 31st March 2024.
- 6.3 Walsall Children's Service's aim is to ensure children & families get the right help at the right time and the introduction of the Families First for Children approach in 2024 strengthens this aim, in that it brings together services for children and families under a combined practice approach and service offer and creates early opportunities for identifying connected people who the Fostering Service can assess and recommend to be approved as Connected Fostering Households. The key features of this approach are understanding and meeting children's needs as early as possible, appreciating that it is essential to help parents and carers build networks around children and families and early identification of alternative carers should the need arise; as for some children, the best option of support, albeit for a short period of time, could be for them to live with another family member or connected person via a regulated arrangement or alternative order.
- 6.4 The Connected Person Team routinely attend Children's Services Legal Gateway Meeting at which they can contribute to the discussions around alternatives to care. The team report an improvement to the quality and use of Genograms in informing decision making for children in need of care and support from their wider kinship network. Alongside the use of Policed National Computer Checks (PNC) and improved preparation before the Initial Viability Assessment (IVA) has led to the Connected Person's Team being asked to consider assessments of prospective carers who are more viable.
- 6.5 On 19th August 2025, there were **22** households having a dual assessment to either be a child's Connected Foster Carer or their Special Guardian; there were **18** children living with this cohort of prospective carers . A further **6** households (includes public & private applications) were being assessed to be a Special Guardian for a further 9 children. In addition to this, there are currently **30** fostering households (combination of connected and mainstream) who are we are either in discussion with or assessing to be a Special Guardian for a Child in our Care.

7. Special Guardianship and other Kinship Arrangements

- 7.1 Many Connected Foster Carers are assessed and approved on the basis that they will go on to apply to be the child's Special Guardian. Unless the Connected Foster Carer or Mainstream Foster Carer are also caring for another Connected Child in Care, on the making of an SGO, they will be deregistered as a Foster Carer; this is a positive as Children's Services actively promote legal permanence through Special Guardianship for children for whom this is the preferred outcome.
- 7.2 On 31st March 2025, there were **346** children supported by their Special Guardians. This represents a **3.5%** decrease to that of 31st March 2024. All Special Guardianship Assessments are completed by the Fostering Service and of the 346

children subject to an SGO, the SGO Support Hub reviewed the SGO Support Plans for **241** children. A large proportion of special guardians declined a review of the SGO Support Plan, the majority stating, they had no concerns. Follow up actions for the families that did not respond to a telephone call, email or letter are being progressed by the SGO Support Hub.

7.3 In 2024/25 **15** children secured special guardianship and this is lower than previous years. There is a joint tracking process to ensure that where this is the child's permanence plan assessments, support plans and applications to courts are progressed.



7.4 To respond to this growing area of work, in 2023, the SGO Support Hub was created and launched; this coincided with Kinship Care Week in October 2023. This service development puts Children's Services in a better position to respond to any requirements outlined Kinship Care Strategy (2023); importantly it has increased capacity in the service to support Special Guardians and other Kinship Arrangements.

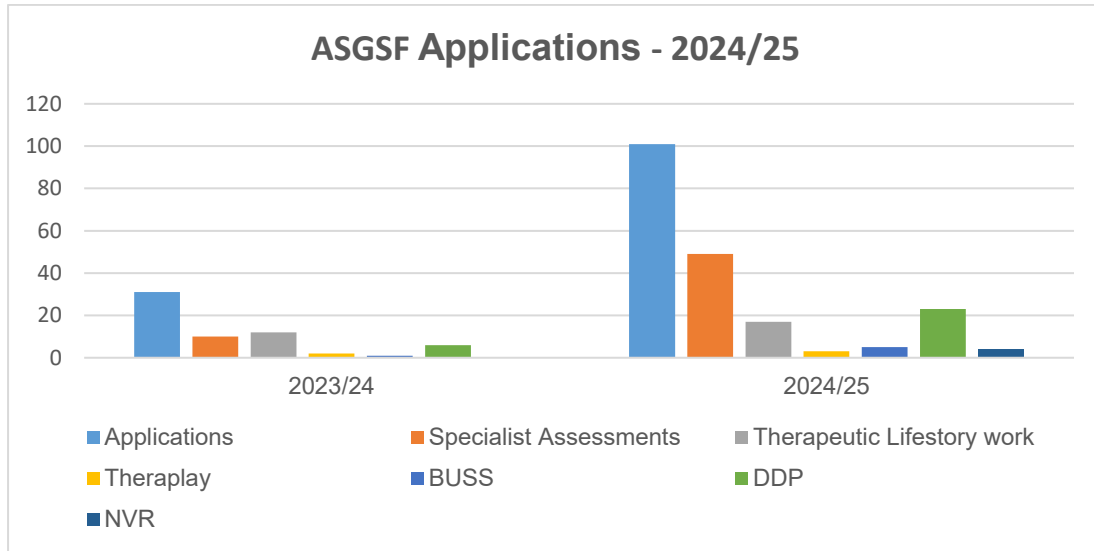
7.5 The Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) provides funds to local authorities and regional adoption agencies (RAAs) to pay for essential therapeutic services for eligible adoptive, special guardianship order (SGO) and child arrangement order (CAO) families. In 2024/25, the SGO Support Hub made **101** applications to the Adoption & Special Guardian Support Fund (ASGSF securing £200K for therapeutic support for children and their families, compared to **31** in 2023/24.

7.6 In April 2025 some changes were made to the ASGSF which brought about some challenges to accessing support. Until the end of March 2025, the ASGSF had 2 fair access limits:

- £2,500 per child per year for specialist assessment
- £5,000 per child per year for therapy.

7.7 From April 2025, there will no longer be 2 fair access limits. The overall fair access limit has been reduced to £3000 maximum. There is no longer separate funding for a specialist assessment and the fund will no longer split fund with the local authority if further support is required within the financial year.

7.8 The work commissioned via ASGSF for 2024/25 is set out in the chart below:



7.9 In addition to the support on offer from the SGO Support Hub, the Fostering Service have a commissioned service from Kinship (Kinship are the leading kinship charity in England & Wales). Walsall recommissioned the Kinship Connected element of support which is a tried and tested model helping local authorities improve outcomes for special guardians and other kinship carers through intensive one-to-one support and peer support groups. It is designed on an asset-based approach, which views the skills, knowledge and resources available in individuals and communities as a means of finding solutions to the issues people face. The model also supports the concept of social action - building local resilience through peer-to-peer volunteering led by kinship carers. Kinship carers are supported over a 26-week period by a project worker during which both 1:1 and peer support is available.

8. Work with internal & external partners to improve recruitment & retention

8.1 To support ongoing service development, the Fostering Service continues to work with Fosterlink. Recently, Fosterlink completed some desktop research and an audit of our channels and website and in late March 2025, they facilitated a workshop with the Recruitment & Assessment Team on communication and marketing. Learning from this is being incorporated into our marketing activity specifically around the focus of the workshop.

- Messages – what are the main things that we need to be telling people quickly?
- Audiences – who are the groups we’re trying to say these things to?

8.2 In addition, the Recruitment & Assessment Team have worked with the Behavioural Insights Team to focuses on strategies for increasing the number of fostering households. The Behavioural Insights Team recently produced a report on this work; the report identifies the key strengths of the team and it outlines the barriers and enablers towards achieving the objective on the recruitment of new fostering households which is also incorporated into our marketing activity

8.3 In 2024, the Fostering Service started to work with Triple Value Impact on a plan to improve our approach to digital marketing. The target of the digital marketing is to attract prospective foster carers for sibling groups and adolescents as this is where our need currently is.

8.4 A statement of works has been completed and agreed, all relevant permissions are in place and an organisation named Golnspire commenced the first phase of this work in June 2025. Golnspire will:

- Use data-led analytical approach to understand the profile and common attributes of the current cohort of foster carers.
- Match these attributes, leveraging a large external data set on households, to match and target suitable persons with appropriate characteristics within the authority.
- Use advanced digital marketing over a 9-month period to encourage suitable candidates to apply to become foster carers through a highly targeted approach.
- Prepare the on boarding to ensure successful campaign recruitment and placement.

9. Promotional & Marketing Activity

9.1 In 2024/25, the budget for Promotional & Marketing activity was uplifted to 65k by refocusing fostering budgets and the same budget is available again for 2025/26. In addition to this budget, a further 65k has been allocated from the Digital Transformation Budget to work with Golnspire (external provider) on the Fostering Services' approach to digital marketing. The Fostering Service have updated the Communication and Marketing Plan which is dynamic. The activity for 2025/26, sets our marketing activity which includes learning from Fosterlink, the Behavioural Insights Team and planned work with Golnspire.

9.2 In 2024/25, the Fostering Service undertook an extensive range of marketing activity which included the following

- Included Fostering leaflet in all letters for Council Tax Bills
- Commissioned a further radio campaign
- Posted on social media accounts
- Featured on Inside Walsall
- Produced article/ advert in Express & Star newspaper
- Attended a wide range of community events; most recently at Walsall FC
- Organised and facilitated a Celebration Event for Black History Month
- Held monthly online information webinars
- Placed additional physical advertising boards on local traffic roundabouts

- Refreshed the advertising campaign on the rear of local buses
- Increased number of lamppost banners
- Refreshed the Foster for Walsall Website
- Arranged for Foster for Walsall artwork to be added to 80 small council vans.

10. Regional Fostering Recruitment Hubs(RFRH)

10.1 In 2024, the Department for Education (DfE) started the work to ensure that every Local Authority (LA) has access to a Recruitment Hub: either through LAs joining an existing hub, or the establishment of new hubs where needed. Following on from the Northeast Pathfinder, to date, the DfE have funded a further nine Regional Recruitment Hubs across England. The funding provided to each hub is based on a funding formula including the number of LAs and considering demographics.

10.2 Existing Hubs have minimum requirements that hubs must adhere to. These are:

- To be a single point of contact for prospective foster carers enquiring across a region.
- Provide initial and ongoing support to prospective foster carers from the point of initial enquiry through to application.
- All regional and local marketing must point to the recruitment support hub.
- Have a system to monitor and track applications from initial enquiry through to application and approval must be implemented and provide monthly reporting on key performance indicators to DfE.
- A lead LA must be identified who will receive grant funding from DfE on behalf of the region.
- LAs within a region must have geographically proximity, for example LAs that boarder each other and have history of regional collaboration.

10.3 Walsall are keen to maintain the improvements and momentum that we have seen in the last 12 months as well as maintain the drive on recruitment activity with the added focus of working with GoInspire. It is also evident that the structure of the fostering service ensures that the service have a dedicated team to drive recruitment and assessment activity. We also keen to ensure that newly approved foster carers (excluding those moving to a Mockingbird Hub) have the continuity of support from their assessing social worker stays for 12 months post-approval. We are keen to ensure that progress made to date is maintained.

10.4 The respective Directors of Children's Services have agreed for the consortium to submit a bid to the DfE, for Walsall to lead on this with the support of the DfE delivery partner, Mutual Ventures.

11. Supervision, Support, Training & Development

- 11.1 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.
- 11.2 To establish a consistent approach to practice that is rooted in nurture, attachment, and recognises the impact of trauma, in 2021/22, the Fostering Service began the ambitious journey for the whole workforce to complete Dyadic Development Practice Training (DDP). DDP is 'a therapy, parenting approach and model for practice that uses what we know about attachment and developmental trauma to help children and families with their relationships.'
- 11.3 The whole workforce has completed DDP1, and a smaller cohort have completed DDP2. This smaller cohort have also completed the 'train the trainer' sessions for Foundation to Attachment and they now deliver Foundation to Attachment Training to Foster Carers. By 31st March 2025, The Fostering Service had supported **130** foster carers to complete this training.
- 11.4 Mockingbird Hub Carers and New Horizon Carers have also completed DDP1 Training and the plan is for the Emergency Foster Carers to also complete this. This offer of training fits with what is outlined in the report from the Fostering Network (2024); in that the expectation on a Fostering Service is to 'provide training . . . focusing particularly on increasing uptake of training on trauma-informed care, and providing opportunities for more advanced training.' Further work is underway to refresh the wider offer of learning & development opportunities for foster carers.
- 11.5 In addition to this **75%** of the workforce have also completed Theraplay level 1 training. Theraplay is a child and family therapy, based on attachment theory, that aims to address behavioural, emotional, and developmental issues. It is endorsed by the Association for Play Therapy as a historically significant play therapy approach. At its core, Theraplay endorses healthy attachments between caregivers and children for them to develop a healthy sense of self. To achieve this, Theraplay has the practitioner, along with the caregiver, facilitate fun, nurturing, and involved activities to build a healthy relationship with the child, allowing them to experience a positive and safe world as they explore their emotional states. It can be adapted for all ages.
- 11.6 Preparation and training groups (Skills to Foster Training) have been held for all prospective mainstream foster carers. This training is also offered separately to Connected Person Foster Carers. Further Foster Carer Training is provided through the Council's 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.
- 11.7 The Fostering Service continue to produce and share regular, separate newsletters with Foster Carers and SGO Carers. In addition to this, all foster carers approved by Walsall Council are provided with membership of the Fostering Network.

12. Mockingbird Family Model

12.1 Mockingbird centres on the idea of an extended network of family support, empowering families to support each other and overcome challenges before they escalate, and to offer children and young people a more positive, consistent, and secure experience of care. There are now **6** operational Mockingbird Hubs with approximately **40** fostering households making use of this support. The 6th Hub was launched during Foster Care Fortnight in May 2024.

12.2 Mockingbird features strongly in the DfE initiative on the retention of foster carers. They note that **82%** of Mockingbird foster carers are less likely to de-register. The report from the Fostering Network also noted the positive impact Mockingbird can have:

Mockingbird foster carers were also significantly more likely to have access to an approved support network or person who can provide overnight care for children (85%) than other foster carers (45%). They were less likely to have experienced burnout or poor wellbeing (54%) than other foster carers (58%), and significantly more likely to feel able to ask for support for their wellbeing (64%) than other foster carers (47%).

12.3 It is positive that Walsall Fostering Service have this model of support available and well embedded; also, they are the only LA/ Trust in the Black Country offering this licensed model of support.

13. Specialist Fostering Schemes

13.1 In May 2023, the New Horizon Fostering Scheme was launched. The aim of this scheme was to recruit foster carers who had the skill set and experience to care for children moving on from living in a Children's Home. On 31st March 2025, there were **3** New Horizon Fostering Households and for the majority of 2024/25, each had a child living with them. In early 2025/26, 2 more New Horizon households were added to the scheme. Whilst this new fostering initiative is very much about children having more options to live in a family environment, it also results in cost avoidance for Children's Services.

13.2 In November 2024, DMT agreed the plan to fund and pilot an Emergency Foster Care Scheme. Promotional material was prepared in December and the scheme was advertised from January 2025. Three internal fostering households submitted an expression of interest to be involved with this pilot scheme. In preparation for the launch of this scheme in May 2025, the Fostering Service have met with the Group Manager for Protection & Assessment and colleagues from EDT. The scheme went live in May 2025 and the launch coincide with Foster Care Fortnight. As at end of July 2025, 11 children have been supported by this new scheme; without this scheme being in place, these children would either have been placed with an IFA or in residential care.

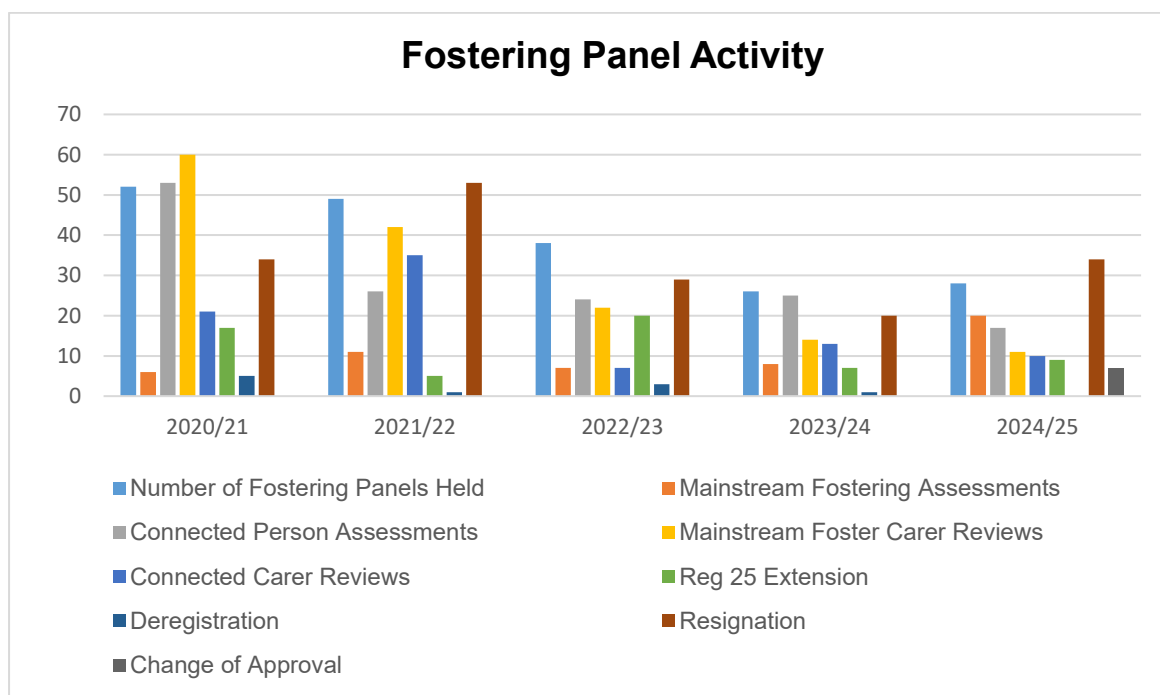
14. Fostering Service Practice Improvement Annual Report 2024/25

- 14.1 The Practice Improvement Manager completes an Annual Report on activity undertaken as part of the Fostering Service Practice Improvement Framework which incorporates 4 areas of Practice Quality Assurance within the Fostering Service, these are:
- Case File Audits
 - Fostering Panel Feedback
 - Themed Case File Audits
 - Learning Reviews
- 14.2 These activities help the Fostering Service to pause and reflect on the work we do, acknowledging our achievements but also highlighting the areas where we need to develop our practice. Not only to improve the service we offer to our foster carers but also to achieve our overall goal which is to improve outcomes for children and young people. These activities form part of learning cycle which over time will embedded themselves into our service and become part of our learning culture.
- 14.3 As the full Annual Report for 2024/25 runs to 16 slides, what follows are some key points. In terms of Case file Audits, the report noted :
- **Consistent Strong Performance** - The fostering service has maintained a high standard, with the majority of ratings falling within the 'Good' category. This reflects a stable and reliable level of practice being delivered consistently.
 - **Clear Improvement Trajectory** - The most recent data (2024/2025) shows no ratings in the 'Inadequate' or 'Requires Improvement' categories, which marks a positive shift. It may suggest that areas of concern identified previously have been addressed effectively.
 - **Opportunity to Stretch Towards Outstanding** - While the number of 'Outstanding' ratings has remained stable, there's potential here to build on what we're doing well and push further. With the right support and focus—particularly around quality assurance and reflective practice—we could begin to shift more of those 'Good' ratings into 'Outstanding'.
- 14.4 The Fostering Panel Feedback Loop was introduced in the Fostering Service in March 2022. This involves the Fostering Panel providing Feedback on the quality of reports that are presented to Panel. Panel members are asked to comment on the strengths areas of development for the social worker. They then rate the overall quality of the reports using an OFSTED style rating system (Requires Improvement, Good or Outstanding).
- 14.5 Feedback forms are then sent to the workers Team Manager to discuss during supervision. Social workers can also provide some feedback to Panel on their experience at Panel and Foster Carers/Applicants are also able to comment on their experience at fostering panel.

- 14.6 In 2024/54, **65** items requiring feedback were presented to the Fostering Panel. of these, **30%** were Mainstream Assessments, **23%** were Connected Persons Assessments and **46%** were Annual Reviews.
- 14.7 **61%** were rated by Panel as 'Outstanding' compared to **65%** the previous year. Whilst there has been a slight drop to this percentage, there were 4 more items presented to Panel this year; furthermore, whereas in 2023/24, there were 4 reports with an Requires Improvement rating, in 2024/25 all reports were rated as Good or Outstanding - Showing an overall continued improvement.
- 14.8 The themes and learning from this work are considered at the Practice Improvement Workstream which is led by the Practice Improvement Manager and Senior Practitioners within the Fostering Service. They meet monthly to implement actions from the Quarterly Practice Improvement Reports and support the service in delivering change to practice.

15. Fostering Panel

- 15.1 In 2024/25, the Chair of Fostering Panel, Lisa Cawthorn resigned and she was replaced on an interim basis by Michael Morris; Sue Partoon continues to act as Vice Chair.
- 15.2 Fostering Panel activity continues to be busy with the Panel meeting on **28** occasions. Panel was quorate on each occasion. In addition to these fostering panels, **8** Permanence Matching Panels took place, at which **21** children were permanently matched to their long-term foster carers. The table below outlines the range of work discussed at Fostering Panel.



16. Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)

- 16.1 The IRM is a review process that prospective or existing foster carers can access when they do not agree with the qualifying determination letter sent to them by their Fostering Service Provider Agency Decision Maker (ADM). The review process is conducted by an IRM review panel which is independent of your fostering service provider. A “Qualifying Determination” is a proposed decision made by a fostering service provider that it does not consider someone suitable to foster. A qualifying determination is issued after either a brief or full report has been presented to the fostering service providers Panel. A qualifying determination can also be issued if the fostering service provider proposes to terminate, or change the terms of approval, of an existing fostering carer.
- 16.2 In 2024/25 **2** prospective foster carers made a referral to the IRM to appeal the decision of Fostering Panel/ ADM. Of the **2** referrals, **1** was upheld.

17. Service Priorities and Developments – 2025/26

- 17.1 As the Annual Report is produced after the Ofsted Dataset is returned in June of the following financial year, by the time the report is completed and ready to be shared, it can be making use of and commenting on activity approaching 12-18 months old; as such, the next section is an attempt to outline the range of work that has taken place or is planned to take place in 2025/26, this includes:
- Maintain a strong focus of fostering recruitment with a focus on attracting foster carers for adolescents and sibling groups, increasing additional New Horizon fostering households.
 - Review foster carer approval statuses to maximise capacity and improve efficiency
 - Review and refresh recruitment and retention plan targeted at areas of need and support for foster carers.
 - Expanding bedroom capacity of known and valued foster carers through the availability of capital funding to increase foster carer capacity through adaptations.
 - Launch and embed the Emergency Fostering Scheme
 - Embed the use of digital marketing to generate more viable enquires from prospective foster carers
 - Continue our work with the Behavioural Insight Team to improve our promotional material and messaging for the recruitment & retention of foster carers
 - Develop a foster carer portal. The portal will provide access to forms, training resources, secure messaging, and the ability to submit logs and claims, thereby streamlining communication and record-keeping.
 - Submit a bid for the DfE Kinship Allowance Pilot

- Lead on the development of Black Country Regional Fostering Recruitment Hub
- Celebration events with Foster Carers and Kinship Carers

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