Agenda Item No. 6

Personnel Committee – 22 April 2024

Report Title: Update on the Recruitment & Retention 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.

1.2 To provide the Personnel Committee with an update on the on work undertaken between September 2023 and March 2024 by the Fostering Service on our recruitment and retention of foster carers.

2. Recommendations

Personnel Committee is recommended to endorse that: -

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

3. Background: Foster Carer Recruitment & Retention

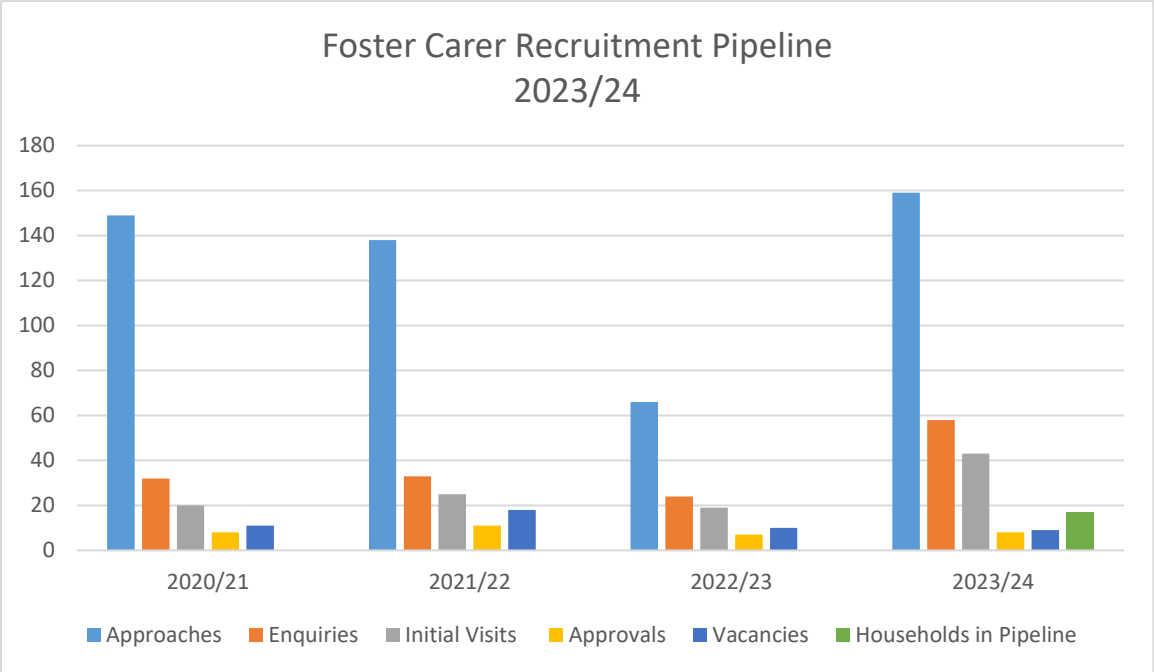
3.1 Foster carers are assessed and approved as either Mainstream or Connected Foster carer. A Connected Foster carer relates to those households who offer to provide care to a child known to them, usually a relative and are approved solely by Local Authorities. The Foster carers in this category sometimes 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.

3.2 On 10th April 2024 there were:

- 102 Mainstream Fostering Households
- 81 Connected Fostering Households
- 2 Foster for Adoption Households

4. Recruitment of Mainstream Foster Carers

4.1 The table below sets out the Foster Carer Recruitment Pipeline. Initial Approaches, Enquiries and Initial Visits for 2023/24 are the highest they have been in a 4-year period.



4.2 In 2023/24, **8** new Mainstream Fostering Household were approved.

4.3 With regards to Walsall Council employees enquiring or being assessed to be a foster carer, in this period, there were **2** employees. One applicant simply stopped responding to any form of communication for the Fostering Service and the other applicant was assessed and presented to the Fostering Panel; however, Fostering Panel did not recommend approval and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM), supported this recommendation. This induvial has the right to have this decision re-examined by the Independent Referral Mechanism (IRM).

4.4 On 5th April 2024, there were **17** prospective fostering households at different stages of the assessment process, currently none are employees with Walsall Council. The Fostering Services are working to have **6** of the **17** presented to Fostering Panel by 30th June 2024.

4.5 Whilst the efforts to recruit foster carers from the wider workforce is yet to yield significant results for our own Fostering Service, what is not known is how many employees have opted to start or continue their fostering career with another Local Authority or IFA. Whilst our preference would be for employees to start their foster career with Walsall, as many may live in other areas, it could be that they have opted to foster local to them.

5. Work to Support the Recruitment & Retention of Foster carers

5.1 As noted in the Fostering Network Report (May 2023), after a survey with foster carers, the top three suggestions for improving recruitment were:

- Improve pay for foster carers
- Having less turnover of social work staff
- Valuing and respecting the role of foster carers more highly

5.2 These three points are central to our approach to the recruitment and retention of foster carers. With regards to turnover of social worker staff, all posts in the Fostering Service are filled on a permanent basis. No agency workers are employed within the service and the most recent departure was in November 2022. There is also greater workforce stability in Children's Social Work Teams.

5.3 A report by The Fostering Network report (2023) highlighted three key themes as factors contributing to foster carers feeling satisfied in their role and how these contribute to people leaving or continuing, they are:

- Receiving sufficient support from fostering services
- Feeling valued and respected by fostering services and social workers
- The adequacy of financial support and administration.

5.4 When asked to rate the support they receive from their Supervising Social Workers, when surveyed in 2022, Walsall foster carers reported a high level of satisfaction, with **80%** reporting it to be 'Good' or 'Very Good' in 2022. The report Fosterlink (see para 5.10) noted that:

- It was very clear that both staff and foster carers are very loyal and committed to the fostering service

- Foster Carers talked positively of their working relationship with the Placement Lead and getting regular communication. They felt that careful matching is actively practiced and in a lot of cases spoke about having the opportunity for introductions before a placement is made

- Foster Carers feel part of a strong fostering community.

5.5 Since the previous report came to Personnel Committee, the Fostering Service have worked with two external organisations who have undertaken a deep dive and a diagnostic to examine how the Fostering Service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers.

5.6 The first organisation, Impower completed a 'deep dive' audit. They produced a report which has been shared with members of the Senior Leadership Team and the Group Manager for Fostering. The report highlights existing key strengths of the Fostering Service as:

- Mockingbird (with a 6th Hub soon to be launched)

- New Horizon Fostering Scheme
- Out of hours support line
- Support is available from a stable workforce that is growing in confidence.

5.7 The second organisation, Fosterlink is the new diagnostic service to support local authority (LA) fostering recruitment and approval services funded by the Department for Education. They will be working with up to 40 LAs on this over the next six months. In the first year, they will work with a Fostering Service to review and examine current processes and help identify areas for service and practice improvements. In year two, they will work with all local authorities by developing and sharing promising and good practice. This includes disseminating examples of effective fostering recruitment practices, facilitating peer-to-peer support and creating networking opportunities.

5.8 The Fostering Service are in the process of examining the findings and learning from these respective reports and will make use relevant recommendations to update the Service Plan which will be regular reviewed via a newly created Steering Group, chaired by the Head of Service.

5.9 **Fees & Allowances:** In late 2022, after consultation with foster carers, Children's Services increased the Fostering Fee by between 10% and 20%. In 2024/25, the Fostering Fee is to be increased by a further **4%**. In 2023/24 the Weekly & Additional Allowances were increased by approx 12.5% and in 2024/25, they are to be increased by a further **6.8%**.

5.10 **Council Tax Charge:** From 1st April 2023, all foster carers who live in Walsall were exempted from paying the Council Tax Charge. Based on current rates, this would save a Fostering Household between £1,507.36 and £4,522.09. This new initiative demonstrates how a council operated Fostering Service can work creatively across Directorates to offer something different and substantial to that on offer from an IFA. Modelling is underway to explore the cost and benefit of extending this benefit to other foster carer cohorts approved by Walsall Fostering Service.

5.11 **Mockingbird Family Model:** 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. The Fostering Service has recruited its 6th Mockingbird Hub Carer. A Pre Lauch has taken place and full launch ins planned for May 2024.

5.12 **Foster carer Telephone Line:** In December 2022, the Fostering Service launched the foster carer Telephone Helpline. This is operated by members of

staff form the Fostering Service and Foster carers and is available to all foster carers out of hours during weekdays and 24/7 at the weekend and bank holidays.

5.13 **Support & Stability Team:** In January 2022, the Fostering Service Launched the newly created Support & Stability Team. The purpose of this team is to provide support to existing Walsall Foster carers and children to improve stability, prevent disruption and endings to children's foster homes, and support children to move from external foster and children's homes into internal foster homes.

5.14 **Extended Access to Capital Fund:** To help foster carers respond to any emerging accommodation needs, they can make a request for financial support to the Fostering Service. The Capital Fund has been extended for a further 3 years and can also be accessed by Special Guardians.

5.15 **Clear Approach to Practice for Workforce and Foster carers:** The Fostering Service now has a clear approach to practice that is rooted in nurture, attachment and recognises the impact of developmental trauma. All staff have completed Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) Training and by Jun 2024, approximately **30** staff will also have completed Theraplay training. Following on from this, the Fostering Service are now delivering Foundation to Attachment Training to all Foster carers. To date approximately **112** Foster carers have completed this training and further cohorts are due to start this in 2024.

5.16 **Foster Carer Thank You Event:** The Fostering Service are currently planning an event for 2024 which will coincide with Fostering Fortnight in May.

5.17 **Launched New Horizon Fostering Scheme:** The aim of this new fostering initiative is to recruit a small group of foster carers who can care for children who are ready to move from a Children's Home into Foster Care. In 2023/24, the Fostering Service recruited 2 fostering households to this scheme and this enabled 2 children to move from external children's homes to live with our foster carers.

6. Promotional & Marketing Activity - 2023/24

6.1 The Fostering Service have updated the Marketing Plan & Communication Plan for 2023/24 and this is used to inform our targeted marketing activities. Since September 2023, the Fostering Service have undertaken the following activities:

- Used paid social media advertising
- Included Fostering leaflet in all letters for Council Tax Bills
- Extended the radio campaign (January – December 2024)
- Fostering Information Mailshot to Walsall residents
- Refreshed the lamppost banners across Walsall
- Placing physical advertising boards on local traffic roundabouts
- Advertising campaign on rear of local buses

- Use of digital advertising in local bus shelters
- Commenced work to refresh the website
- Attended/ information stand face to face events at Manor Hospital (monthly)
- Regular posts on social media accounts
- Held monthly online information webinars
- Attended/ information stand at Bloxwich Leisure Centre
- Attended/ information stand at the Big Impact Event, Palfrey Park
- Attended/ information stand at the Residents R Us Summer Fete
- Attended/ information stand at the Unity Festival
- Attended/ information stand at Early Years Event - Manor Farm
- Attended Guru Nanak Gurdwara Sahib (two occasions)
- Attended/ information stand at Walsall Art Gallery
- Attended/ information stand at Residents R Us Christmas Fete
- Attended/ information stand at Pelsall Cricket & Sports Club
- Attended/ information stand at Walsall College Hub
- Attended/ information stand at local Dunelm store
- Attended/ information stand at the Civic Centre
- Attended/ information stand at Walsall College Hub
- Attended/ information stand at Willenhall Chart Community Hub
- Attended/ information stand at Ikea
- Attended/ information stand at Asda, Darlaston (two occasions)
- Attended/ information stand at Walsall Works Expo

6.2 Activity under consideration or planned for later Summer/ early Autumn 2023 is:

6.3 We have met with the management boards of both Walsall Health Trust and Walsall Housing Group in March and April 2023 who have committed to adopting fostering friendly policies. We are promoting the Fostering Friendly Policy at job fairs.

7. Financial

7.1 No change to the information used in the initial report.

8. Legal

8.1 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. Human resources (walsall.gov.uk)

9. Risk Management

9.1 N/A.

10. People

10.1 No change to the information used in the initial report.

11. Consultation

11.1 No change to the information used in the initial report.

12. Closing Comments:

12.1 With regards to Walsall Council employees being recruited as foster carers, the low uptake to date should not be interpreted to mean achieving Fostering Friendly Employer Status was the wrong strategic decision; lengthy deliberations are often a common feature of people's journey into fostering. As our improved offer to foster carers is in its infancy, we hope to see the benefits of our work and this initiative in 2024/25.

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