

Fostering Service Annual Report 2020-2021

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 This report summarises the activity of the Fostering Service from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021.
- 1.2 Walsall Council is committed to ensuring that, wherever possible, children are supported to live with their birth parents. Where this has not been possible and children become looked after, it is preferable that they are placed within a family setting. It is the aim of the council that wherever possible this will be with foster carer/s home approved by Walsall rather than through commissioning an external placement. Through guidance on delegated authority, there is a recognition that foster carers should be empowered to take on the day to day tasks of parenting in the same way as any good parent would.
- 1.3 Foster care is subject to legislative and regulatory guidance through, The Children Act 1989, The Fostering Regulations 2011 and the Fostering National Minimum Standards 2011. It is further regulated through the Care Planning, Placement and Case Regulations 2010. The regulatory framework for fostering sets out the minimum standards expected to ensure that the care provided by foster carers is adequate to ensure that those children placed within fostering placements are well cared for and achieve good outcomes.
- 1.4 Fostering placements are referred to as either Mainstream or Connected Persons. Connected persons fostering refers to those households who offer to provide care to a child known to them, usually a relative. Mainstream foster care refers to a range of households who apply to become foster carers for children not known to them. Mainstream foster carers include those offering both long- and short-term care and those who provide respite care. Mainstream carers can be approved to care for between 1 and 3 children at a time and can care for children throughout the age range.
- 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 looked after children of Walsall.

2. Overview of Achievements in 2020/21:

- Implemented Fostering Service Redesign
- Delivered effective support throughout the Global Pandemic
- Completed and provided feedback on our first Annual Foster Carer Survey
- Improved workforce stability - Reduced reliance on agency workers in the Fostering Service

- Provided a one off C19 payment to help Foster Carers with additional expenses
- Launched one new Mockingbird Hub and secured agreement to increase Mockingbird Hubs from 3 to 6
- Commenced Partnership working with Kinship
- Improved permanence for children through Special Guardianship Orders (SGO)
- Recruited more Foster Carers than previous 2 years
- Secured agreement to create a Support and Stability Team
- Secured agreement to provide improved training offer to Foster Carers and employees
- Secured agreement to trial dedicated telephone support line for Foster Carers
- Reintroduced Case File Auditing
- Put in place an Action Plan to improve work and learning into and from Fostering Panel
- Introduced Practice Improvement Group
- Undertook a review of the effectiveness of fostering panel
- Created post of Practice Improvement Manager
- Developed a Performance Dashboard
- Secured agreement for slight uplift on children's allowances for Foster Carers
- Introduced Monthly Support Meetings for Foster Carers
- Introduced regular newsletters to both Foster Carers and Special Guardians

3. The Structure Of The Fostering Service

- 3.1 In March 2019 as part of the improvement agenda for Children's Social Care a review of the Fostering Service was undertaken which made a number of key recommendations to drive improvements in recruiting, assessing, supervising and supporting mainstream and connected foster carers.

- 3.2 A key recommendation was in respect to the span of management grip and oversight. The review led to the creation of 4 teams and strengthened management structure to drive improvements in the meeting regulatory requirements, supervision of staff and quality of practice required to undertake assessments, supervision and support to Mainstream and Connected Foster Carers. The proposal endorsed by Directorate Management Team involved deleting two existing Assistant Team Manager posts and the Panel Advisor post, creating 2 additional Team Managers and creating three Senior Practitioners. Full implementation of the redesigned structure became operational in April 2020.
- 3.3 Critically a fourth team was created to increase the capacity for Connected Persons assessment and to enable those who support and supervise Connected Foster Carers and Special Guardians to specialise in this work. There has been a significant rise in the proportion of children cared for in such foster homes and combining the supervision of these households has enabled greater focus in the mainstream support team on growing in house mainstream capacity.
- 3.4 The Fostering Service is managed by the Group Manager for Provider Services and they report to the Head of Service for Corporate Parenting. The primary objectives for role of Group Manager are:
- Responsible for the service planning and management of all local authority Fostering Services
 - Registered Manager of the Fostering Service
 - Line Manager for the Residential Services Manager who has responsibility for the Local Authority children's homes
 - Line Manager for the Placement Services Manager who has responsibility for finding external placements for Looked After Children.
- 1.1 Full implementation of the redesigned structure became operational in April 2020. A Team Manager now manages each team and all except the Recruitment and Assessment Team have a Senior Practitioner. Each team has 5fte social worker posts. As reported in the Annual Report for 2019/20, full implementation of the Fostering Service redesign took longer than planned. The permanent Group Manager joined the service in late November 2019, the Team Manager for Connected Persons Team joined in March 2020 and the Senior Practitioners took up their posts in April 2020. The Recruitment and Promotion Officer post was also vacant from October 2019 and recruited to in May 2020. The service was also operating with several agency social workers at the time; this has now reduced significantly.
- 1.2 The new structure comprises of the following teams:
- **Recruitment & Assessment**
- This team is responsible for the assessments of Mainstream Foster Carers. The team provides supervision and support to carers until their

first annual review. The team are also responsible for working in conjunction with the Children's Social Work Teams on the completion of Private. A full time customer services officer responds to all enquiries from adults expressing interest in becoming foster carers. This team also operates a duty service. The team is also responsible for all marketing, recruitment, training and assessment activities. There is also a recruitment and promotions officer post that is instrumental in the production of new marketing materials and the coordination of new marketing events.

- **Support & Development**

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

- **Support & Development (Mockingbird)**

As detailed above plus responsible for delivering the Mockingbird Fostering model for the Local Authority.

- **Connected Persons**

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

- **Independent Fostering Reviewing Officer**

The IFRO undertakes all Annual Reviews of Foster Carers.

2. Looked After Children Analysis

- 2.1 There has been a significant increase in the numbers of Looked After Children in Walsall over the past 10 years by **37%** from **490** in 2012 to **671** in 2021. For 6 of the last 10 years, there has been an upward trend of children becoming looked after.
- 2.2 Although Walsall's rate of Looked After Children per 10,000 is lower than our statistical neighbours, it is higher than both the National and West Midlands averages, as such, it is reasonable to assume that there will be future demand for foster care.
- 2.3 Currently **24%** of our children are under 5 years of age, higher than national average of **21%**. With regard to children aged between 10 and 15, Walsall's rate

of **37%** is slightly lower than the national average of **39%**. The majority (**52%**) of our children are male, which is lower than the National and West Midlands averages.

- 2.4 Matching the ethnicity of children to foster carers remains steady; however, as with a slightly increasing Asian and Black British child group to support, future successes will require more culturally matched internal foster carers and diverse foster carer recruitment activity. Target recruitment campaigns are ongoing to meet the needs of minority ethnic looked after children.
- 2.5 Walsall predicts a gradual increase to the number of children becoming looked after who are part of a sibling group. The size of sibling groups will be marginally smaller (2 or 3 children per group) but group numbers will be more frequent. Of the 97 children who started to live with foster carers in 2020/21, there were **18** sibling groups with **52** siblings.

3. Children Living with Foster Carers

- 3.1 On 31st March 2021, there were **387** approved internal foster placements available (figure includes both mainstream & connected carers). This is higher than both outturns for 2019 (355) and 2020 (355), this is also higher than our Statistical Neighbour and West Midlands average (340 & 432) respectively. The breakdown of these placements per category was:

- Mainstream Carers 233
- Connected Carers 154
- Total – 387

- 3.2 At the end of March 2021, of the **670** Looked after Children, **501** (75%) were living with foster carers of which **148** (38%) were living with Walsall foster carers compared with **165** at the end of March 2020. This equates to **29.5%** of those children in foster care in 2020 compared with **31.5%** in 2020.

| Fostering | 31/03/19 | 31/03/20 | 31/03/21 |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Looked After Children | 615 | 669 | 670 |
| Placed with Foster Carers | 459 | 523 | 501 |
| Placed with Internal Foster Carers | 189 | 165 | 148 |
| Percentage of Children with Internal Foster Carers | 41.2 | 31.5 | 29.5 |

- 3.3 There were **119** children living with Connected Foster Carers. In keeping with children's care plans, a Special Guardianship Order quite commonly replaces Connected Fostering arrangements within 12 months from the making of the Full Care Order where appropriate and in line with the Child's care plan.
- 3.4 On 31/3/21, there were 239 children living with independent fostering agencies and this is an increase compared with the 227 on 31/3/20 and 158 on 31/3/19.

3.5 Compared to 2019/20, throughout the full year, the number of children who had lived with internal mainstream foster carers remained static at 320.

4. Practice & Performance

4.1 To bring an improved focus to understanding practice and performance, the Fostering Service reintroduced the use of Case File Auditing and worked with colleagues in the Performance Improvement and Quality Service to develop a Performance Dashboard that uses data and an information from Mosaic Records to populate reports on the PowerBI Platform.

4.2 With regard to Case File Audits, the Learning Audit Tool used for these audits follows the same Practice Priorities used in the Child's Journey Audit Tool; however, some prompts were changed to allow for a focus on the assessment, support and development of Foster Carers. There is still a focus on the outcomes for children though and an additional section is included for the auditor to capture the views of the Foster Carer.

4.3 To improve the independence and objectivity of this activity, the Independent Fostering Review Officer randomly selects the case files for audit and allocates these for completion to either a Team Manager or Senior Practitioner that is not currently involved in the management oversight of the case. When completing a case File Audit, the auditor considers all activity for the previous 12 months.

4.4 Since the reintroduction of Case File Auditing in September 2020, **44** Case File Audits were completed. A steady improvement is evident against all of the Practice Priorities and of the **44** cases audited, **52%** were received an overall rating of 'Good'. When you factor in the ratings for Q1 (2021/22), this cumulatively increases to **56%**; however, when separated out, Q1 figure of cases with overall rating of Good is **67%**.

4.5 When completing the Case File Audit, the auditor speaks to the Foster Carer to check out their views on the relationship with their Supervising Social Worker and the Child's Social Worker. Foster Carers are also asked if they are involved in the child's care plan and invited meetings. For the audits completed in Q3 and Q4, Foster Carers rated their as 'Very Good' or 'Good'. They also reported that they involved the child's care plan and routinely invited to attend meetings.

4.6 On completion of a 12-month cycle of Case File Audits, the Group Manager will produce an Annual Report regarding this activity. The Fostering Service will then use the learning from this to map out a range of auditing activity for 2022.

4.7 The lack of accurate performance data had been a weakness for the Fostering Service. To address this, the Fostering Service have worked with colleagues in Performance Improvement and Quality Service to develop a Performance Dashboard. The reports that are now in place cover the full fostering journey and there is a separate report in development for Special Guardianship Carers. There is still some work to do on some of the background data for these reports and the application of these reports across the service is in its infancy;

notwithstanding, these reports represent a significant improvement to the data that was previously available.

5. Annual Foster Carer Survey

- 5.1 Although the Fostering Service had undergone a redesign, to help the Fostering Service understand, develop and embed its approach to the recruitment and support of Foster Carers, the Fostering Service needed to hear from our Foster Carers about their experience of fostering for Walsall Council. In order to gain this insight, it was agreed that a Foster Carer Survey was required.
- 5.2 The survey was undertaken in summer 2020, the format and questions for the Foster Care Survey was developed between the Fostering Service and colleagues in Corporate Consultation. Snap Survey software was used to help with the collation and reporting of the data and information.
- 5.3 In August 2020, the survey was sent to all approved Foster Carers. The survey ran for approximately three weeks, closing in September 2020 and 65 surveys were completed and returned. In Quarter 3 of 2020/21, the Fostering Service explored and analysed the extensive data and information contained in the completed surveys.
- 5.4 In March 2021, the Fostering Service provided feedback on the survey to Foster Carers; members of the Senior Leadership Team and the Lead Member for Children's Services also attended these sessions. Also shared and considered in these sessions were the plans for service development based on Foster Carer feedback. In order for this exercise to be more impactful, the Fostering Service have acknowledged that the timescale from the surveys being completed, to providing feedback needs to be shorter.
- 5.5 Constructed to capture both quantitative and qualitative information, the survey covered the following aspects of the fostering role:
 - Demographics
 - Support
 - Training & Development
 - Annual Reviews
 - Fostering Panel
 - Impact of Covid 19
 - Annual Events
 - Communication
 - What is working well for you as a Foster Carer
 - What needs to improve to help you as a Foster Carer
- 5.6 The Fostering Service e produced a response to the survey which was shared with our Foster Carers, the Lead Member and the Directorate Management Team (DMT).

6. Foster Carer Recruitment – National & Local Picture:

- 6.1 Research from the Fostering Network, indicates that only one in ten enquiries will become a newly registered household. In order to generate 20 new foster carer households, Walsall will need to receive 200 new enquiries per year. With recruitment still taking place in what could be described as an “overcrowded market” with Local Authorities competing with Independent Fostering Agencies and Voluntary agencies, this remains a challenge.
- 6.2 Walsall’s Fostering Service is operating in a highly competitive market place, which has seen an exponential growth of independent fostering agencies (IFAs). Historically IFAs have operated in a market of high demand and they have marketed themselves as filling a position to meet needs that typically local authority fostering services have been unable to provide (i.e. young people with complex challenging or dangerous behaviour, mother / baby places and other specific characteristics). IFAs operate on a national and local basis actively seeking to recruit current and potential foster carers from across Walsall and surrounding areas. They offer higher financial rewards and other recruitment and retention incentives.
- 6.3 Walsall Fostering Service now uses a cloud-based platform (Akeru) to attract and nurture prospective foster carers. Akeru enables the active measurement and optimization of each stage of the recruitment funnel.
- 6.4 There currently is no national data available to measure the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on foster carer recruitment and retention. However, based on anecdotal evidence and conversations with external stakeholders, we predict the coronavirus pandemic will have increased the need for more fostering households to ensure there is sufficient capacity to make the best matches for children. This may need to be reviewed throughout the year. (Source: Fostering Network).
- 6.5 There was a thought that the impact of the coronavirus pandemic could lead to a rise in the number of people considering fostering, in that the loss of employment might be an impetus for a change of direction and career. However, as there has been a growth in the number of people now working from home, the spare bedroom that once was available may now be being utilised as office space.
- 6.6 Between April 2020 and March 2021, there were 8 new Mainstream Fostering households approved at Fostering Panel and 12 Connected Person Households were recommend for approval at Fostering Panel.
- 6.7 **Effects of Walsall Demographics on Foster Carer Recruitment & Retention**

- 6.8 Having both a very young and an aging population could mean that potential foster carers or current of foster carers may have to take on the role of caring for their parents or grandchildren through providing informal care. This could impact on the availability and recruitment of potential foster carers.
- 6.9 Walsall has a higher than average percentage of households who live in socially rented housing. Social housing accounts for **24%** of the borough's accommodation, significantly higher than the England & Wales average of 17% (2011 Census).
- 6.10 According to the Office of National Statistics household projection (2018 Based), there is estimated 114,000 households in Walsall borough, and therefore it equates that more than 27,000 households are social housing lettings. These homes are allocated on need for bedrooms and therefore people in this type of housing will not usually have a spare room, an essential requirement for fostering for Walsall. However, due to the shortage of council/social housing stock we have seen an increase in the private housing sector which has allowed more prospective applicants to rent suitable accommodation which would allow them to foster.
- 6.11 In addition, as half of the Borough's 20 wards are among the most deprived quintile (i.e. the most deprived 20% of LSOAs), deprivation is likely to have an impact upon fostering recruitment activity.

7. Marketing, Recruitment and Mainstream Approvals

- 7.1 The global Coronavirus pandemic had a critical effect on services and to the recruitment of foster carers (see para 6.4& 6.5). This meant any face-to face events ceased and our focus shifted to heavily digitally led marketing strategies. We increased our online presence, adapted the delivery of services from face to face to online and provided support during the adaption process. We will review our approach to face-to face events in line with both Central and Local Government advice and guidelines.
- 7.2 From October 2019 to May 2020, the Fostering Service was without a Recruitment & Promotions Worker. Whilst there was some digital content (images) on our Facebook and Twitter pages, prior to May 2020, the Fostering Service's main approach to promotion and marketing consisted of traditional marketing such as, newspaper adverts, leaflet distribution, posters, and monthly face-to-face information events.
- 7.3 Our campaigns will target recruitment of carers for:
- Older adolescents
 - Brothers and Sisters
 - Parent and Child Foster Carers
 - Mockingbird Hub Carers

7.4 In 2020/21, there were **8** new mainstream fostering households approved and this created **10** placements. Whilst this is a significant improvement on the 2 fostering households approved in 2019/20, it still falls well short of our ambition to recruit and approve additional foster carers. The figure for 2021/22 is more encouraging; the Fostering Service are on track to recruit **14** new mainstream fostering households.

7.5 Between April 2020 and March 2021, Walsall Council received **154** general enquiries from residents about foster care. Of these, **31** progressed to initial visits and following further checks **8** became new foster carer households in the last year. This equates to a conversation rate of **26%**

7.6 Our target per year over the next three years is to attract a net increase of **20** fostering placements for 2021/22, **25** for 2022/23 and **30** for 23/24.

8. Deregistrations:

8.1 In 2020/21, **36** fostering households were de-registered. The table below outlines the reason for deregistration and includes data for both Mainstream and Connected Carers:

| | SN Average 2020 | WM Average 2020 | Walsall 2019 | Walsall 2020 | Walsall 2021 |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| De-registered to facilitate a transfer to an independent fostering agency | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| De-registration initiated by the fostering service | 18 | 17 | 19 | 9 | 10 |
| De-registration initiated by the foster carer | 19 | 37 | 20 | 15 | 10 |
| De-registration for unknown reason | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| De-registered to facilitate a transfer to a local authority | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| De-registered because the family adopted the child/children | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 1 |
| De-registered because the family took out a SGO for the child/children | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 14 |
| Total households de-registered between 1st April and 31st March | 36 | 55 | 40 | 28 | 36 |

8.2 As there were **36** deregistrations or resignations, this represents an overall loss of **16** Foster Carers. As noted in the table above, 14 (38%) deregistrations relate to the child's carer becoming their special guardian.

9. Occupancy of Mainstream Fostering Placements

9.1 Walsall's mainstream foster carers now provide an average of **1.8** approved placements per household. Over the past 12 months, this rate has not changed from 1.8 on 31/3/20 to 1.8 on 31/3/21.

9.2 The role of Placements Liaison Officer was also created in April 2019 to support the efficient matching of in house foster carers to children requiring a foster placement. This role has supported the service to increase occupancy rates of in-house household and the close working between the Fostering Service and the Placements Team is considered to be a contributory fact in maintaining this percentage.

10. Connected Persons Fostering

10.1 Connected Persons arrangements are often very complex situations with families struggling to come to terms with the reasons why the children have become looked after. Connected Foster Carers receive the same level of supervision as mainstream carers. The Skills to Foster training tailored specifically for Connected Persons carers.

10.2 In 2020/21, **12** Connected Person Households were approved at Fostering Panel. Whilst this is a decrease from the **36** in 2019/20, the **12** new approvals created **19** placements.

10.3 The table below outlines the number of children living with Connected Carers. The number of children cared for in a connected persons fostering arrangement approved by Walsall Council decreased by 15 in 2020/21. The service is actively promoting legal permanence through Special Guardianship for children for whom this is the preferred outcome.

| Year End | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Connected Care (Fostering) | 130 | 127 | 115 | 134 | 119 |
| % of total LAC | 20.1 | 19.9 | 18.7 | 20.0 | 17.7 |

13 Achieving Permanency

13.1 Walsall has a commitment to ensure that a child's need for a permanent home is addressed and that a permanence plan is made at the earliest opportunity. The aim is to ensure that each child has an agreed permanence plan in place by the second Looked after Review.

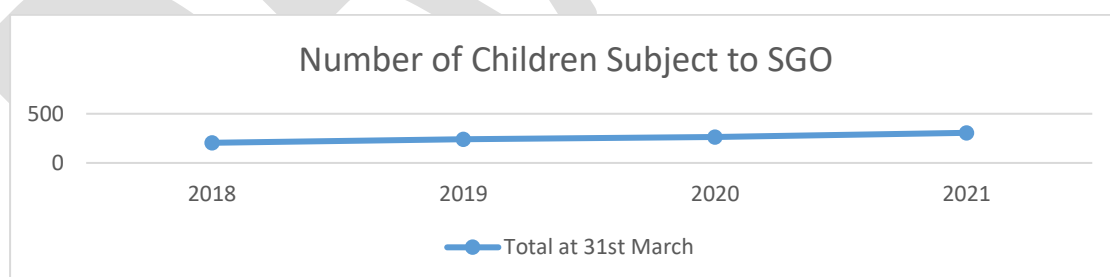
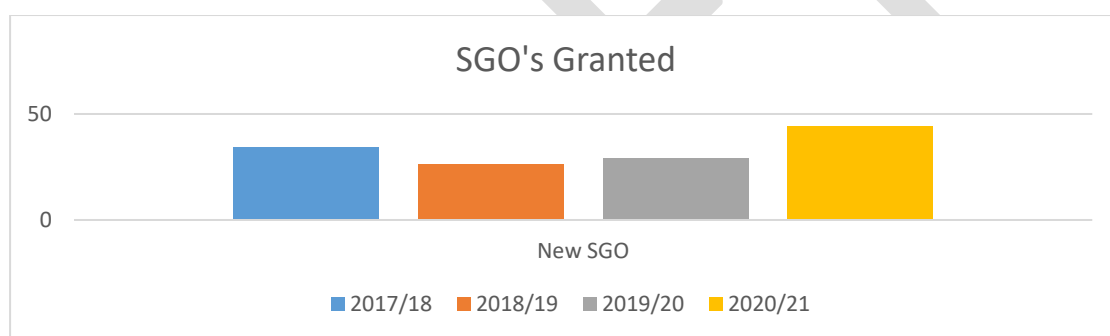
13.2 The expectation is that all children under the age of 16 will have a permanency plan; this can range from an eventual return home, a long-term placement with a foster carer, a Special Guardianship Order, a Child

Arrangement Order, or Adoption. For those 16 plus, the expectation is that their permanency plan will be addressed through their Pathway Plan.

13.3 The post of Permanency Co-ordinator was created in 2016 to track and monitor all permanency plans. All children with a care plan of long term fostering, adoption and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) 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 applications as a means to achieve permanency with the confidence that this support will be offered after the order is granted.

13.4 The tables below outlines the number of SGO's granted each year and the number of children who are being supported under an SGO. Both tables indicate trajectory of growth in this option of permanence for children.

13.5 On 31st March 2021, there were **306** children supported by their Special Guardians. This represents a **49%** increase to that of 31st March 2018. The total number of children is continuing to rise in 2020/21 (**325** as at 01/11/21).



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 According to the Fostering Service Regulations, at least one unannounced visit is undertaken to each fostering household each year. The frequency of unannounced visits is recorded on Mosaic, monitored by the Team Manager, the Annual Review process and the use of PowerBi Reports.

- 11.3 In 2018/19, compliance at the end of financial year was **90%**. In 2019/20, this improved to **94%** and in 2020/21, it was **92%**. The global pandemic did have an impact on this aspect of work. In the early part of 2020, numbers were low but these began to recover to business as usual by November 2020.
- 11.4 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.
- 11.5 In our Foster Carer Survey 2020, Foster Carers told us that they enjoy both a mix of virtual and online training. However, as the only real option to offer training in the previous 2020/21 was online, we have improved the online training offer.
- 11.6 To do this, the Recruitment & Retention Training & Development Workstream reviewed the existing arrangements and changed provider. The Fostering Service are now using the provider 'The Training Hub' for online training. Before opting for this provider, we asked a group of Foster Carers to sample the range of training on offer and they confirmed that this was an improvement on what we was previously available to them.
- 11.7 Preparation and training groups (Skills to Foster) have been held for all prospective mainstream foster carers. The training is delivered by the Fostering Service and in response to Covid 19, took place virtually in 2020/21. Connected persons foster carers are also invited to attend this training.
- 11.8 The service continues to support newly approved foster carers in completing the mandatory Training Support and Development Standards (TSD). There is an adapted version of these standards for connected persons foster carers and there is an expectation that any connected person carer completes this within 18 months of approval.
- 11.9 Capturing detailed information about the training and development of individual foster carers in a way that is reportable is an area of development for the service. While this information is known and monitored on an individual basis by supervising social workers, we are currently implementing the recording and data capture mechanisms that will allow us to report on and monitor this on an ongoing basis at a service level.
- 11.10 However, we know from our annual Fostering Return, we know that of the 325 foster carers that were approved on 31st March 2021:

| Status | | Number / % |
|---------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| TSD1 | Not yet commenced | 59 (18.2%) |
| TSD2 | Training in progress | 59 (18.2%) |
| TSD3 | Awaiting sign off | 6 (1.8%) |
| TSD4 | Workbook completed | 201 (61.8%) |

11.11 In August 2020, Walsall Foster Care Association (WFCA) inform Walsall Council that they would not be offering the services requested by the Fostering Service. Whilst the WFCA remain operational and some foster carers continue to access what support is on offer, the WFCA no longer receive any financial support from Walsall Children's Services Directorate.

11.12 In October 2020, the Fostering Service introduced Monthly Support Groups for our Foster Carers. These currently take place virtually (morning & evening sessions) and are arranged and led by the Senior Practitioners. All Foster Carers are invited to these by a Senior Practitioner. Each session is themed and we aim to involve a guest speaker in each of these. We are working towards offering both face-to-face and virtual groups. Overtime, it is envisaged that those attending these groups can move to becoming a Foster Carer Association so that we can tap into their expertise to develop and shape the service. Areas covered in recent months are:

- Mockingbird
- CAMHS
- Early Years Support years team (supported young children)
- Staying Put

11.13 The Fostering Service now produce and share regular, separate newsletters with Foster Carers and SGO Carers

11.14 The Fostering Service are working on a plan to offer Nurture and Attachment Training (NATP) to all Foster Carers. In order for the Fostering Service to deliver on this, we are in the process of our staff completing Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy Training (DDP) and then the NATP train the trainer programme.

11.15 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.'

11.16 Foster carers can access support and advice out of hours via the Council's Emergency Duty Team (EDT). All foster carers have the contact details for EDT and reports from carers who have used the service are positive. Carers use the service to report significant events and to seek guidance. On occasions, social workers have visited carers' homes out of hours, most usually in response to children exhibiting disruptive behaviour.

11.17 The Fostering Service continues to have access to regular consultation surgeries provided by Flash Service – the Tier 2/3 CAMHS service. The Hub Carers with the Mockingbird Service can use this service to consult on the

support they provide to the households in their hubs. Supervising Social Workers support foster carers to make use of the advice and support attendance by children requiring intervention.

11.18 All foster carers approved by Walsall Council are provided with membership of the Fostering Network.

12. Mockingbird Family Model

12.1 There are now three Mockingbird Constellations. The plan is to grow the number of Hub Carers to 6 by 2022. As of 1/11/21, the current position is as follows:

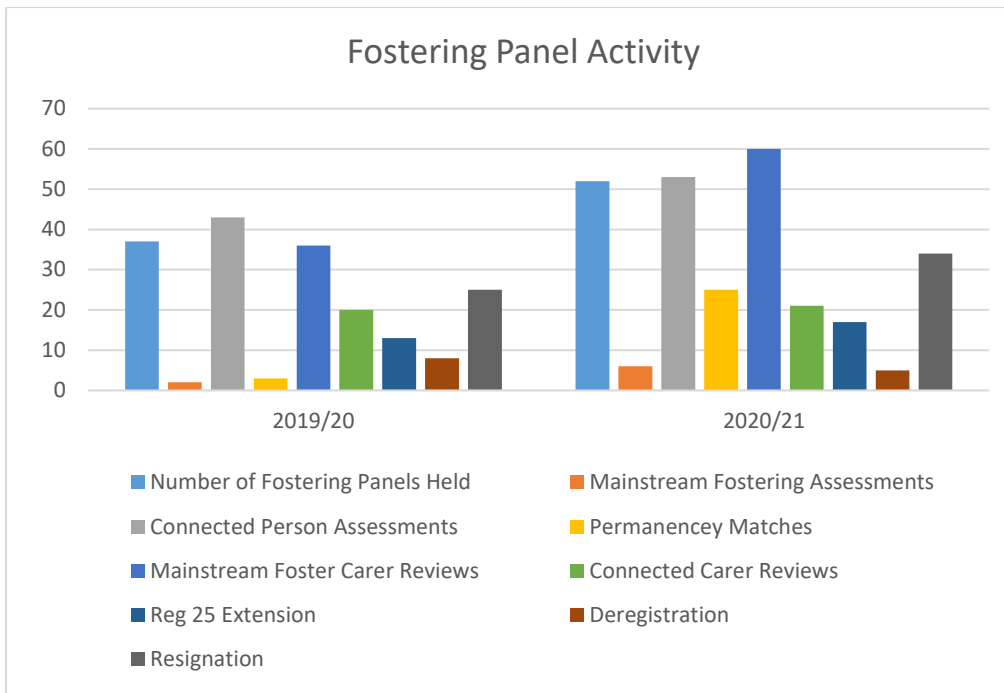
- Hubs – 3
- Hub Carers 9 (current hub carers and hub carers to be)
- Foster Carers- 57
- Looked After children- 40
- Adopted children- 6
- Children subject to SGO-1
- Birth Children- 17
- Adult household members- 6
- Totalling- 136 people

12.2 Walsall continues to work with Fostering Network in developing and delivering within the efficacy of the model and have agreed to be involved in an evaluation of that is being conducted by the Rees Centre at the Department for Education at the University of Oxford, commissioned by the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care. The evaluation aims to assess the impact of the Mockingbird programme on placement stability, on foster carer retention, and on changes in wellbeing of children in care.

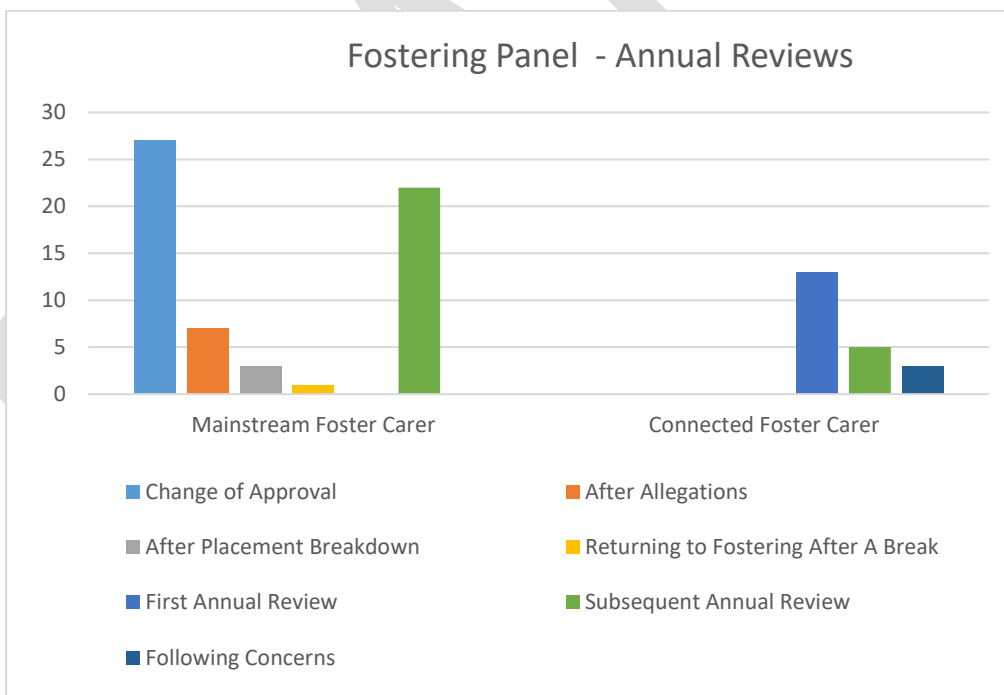
13. Fostering Panel

13.1 In 2020, Chris Dennison stepped down from his role as Chair of Fostering Panel. Lisa Cawthorn is continued as Chair and there are two Vice Chairs who are Sue Partoon and Catherine Mitchley.

13.2 Fostering Panel activity continues to be busy with the Panel meeting on 52 occasions. Panel was quorate on each occasion. The table below outlines the range of work discussed at Fostering Panel.



13.3 The table below sets out the reasons why a matter was discussed at Fostering Panel following an Annual Review:



13.3 Up until December 2019, a dedicated, full time Panel Advisor took the lead on co-ordinating the recruitment, induction and annual appraisal of panel members. During 2019-20, they also arranged training days for panel members alongside facilitating their private study through sharing information from guidance and research with panel members.

13.4 As part of the service redesign, the Panel Advisor post was deleted and Fostering Service Team Managers act as Panel Advisor on a Rotational basis at Fostering Panel. Due to other demands on Team Manager though, other aspects of the work associated with Panel Advisor have not been completed. To address this, the Fostering Service reviewed and deleted the role for the full time Independent Fostering Reviewing Officer and replaced this with post of Practice Improvement Manager. This post became operational in August 2021 (out of scope for this Annual Report).

14. Staying Put

14.1 The provision for 'Staying Put' has ensured that many young people are able to remain with their carers beyond their 18th birthday. Although this continues to represent a challenge around managing the availability of fostering placements, it remains important to ensure that the offer of staying put is made to every young person in foster care.

14.2 In 2020/21, of the **19** Care Leavers, **14** (73.6%) of these stayed put with their foster carers. At 31st March 2021, there were **41** care leavers age 19 and 20 that were in a fostering placement when leaving care. **18** (43.5%) of these were with former foster carers. Of the 18, **7** were from IFAs, **10** from Internal Fostering and **1** from connected care

10. Complaints

10.1 During 2020/21, the Fostering Service received 5 complaints; 3 from approved foster carers and 2 from prospective foster carers.

10.2 The reason for the complaints were:

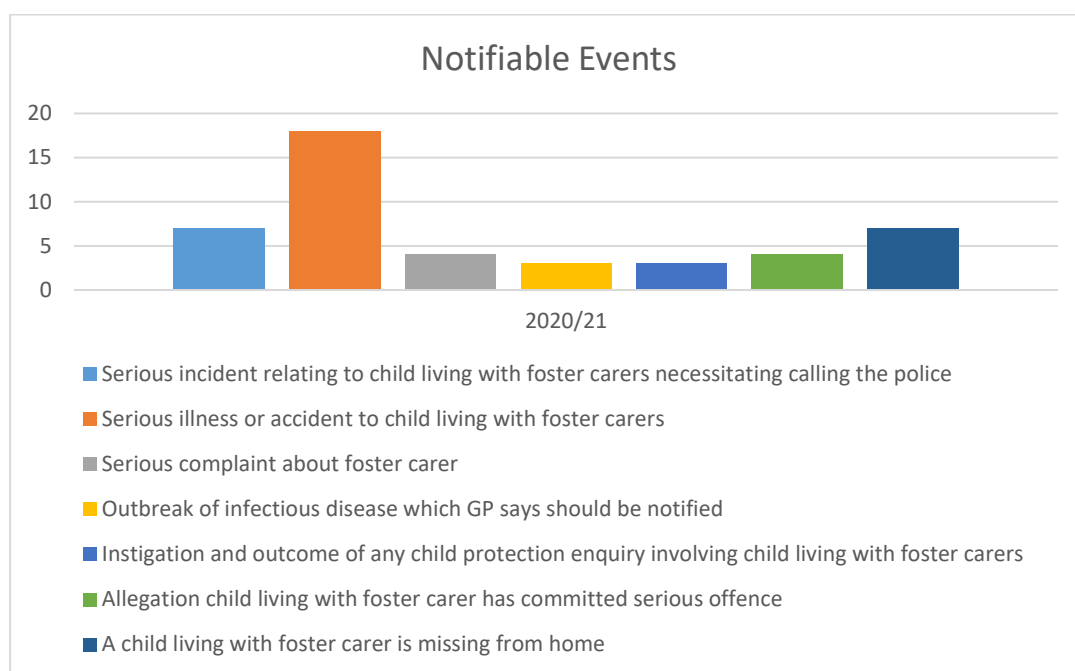
- Complaint about perceived lack of support from, discrimination by and unprofessional conduct of Fostering Team
- Complaint in regards to the decision to not financially back date progression to Advanced Level payment to Easter 2017
- Carers not happy that a portion of fostering allowance to be deducted due to the need to fund school transport
- Unhappy with fostering reference
- Disappointed with experience at Panel meeting in January 2021

10.3 All complaints were resolved: 3 were resolved at Stage1, 1 was resolved after a review by Senior Manager and 1 progressed and was resolved via LGO, which in the main, upheld how Fostering Service had attempted to resolve the matter.

11. Notifiable Events

11.1 In 2020/21, there were **46** Notifiable Events (Regulation 36, Schedule 7 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2011). The majority (**39%**) related a child being

unwell or having an accident. The table below provides an overview of the other categories.



10.4 There were four allegations against Local Authority Foster Carers. Of these, three resulted in Section 47 enquiries being made. Following the allegations being submitted, one resulted in no further action being taken. The remaining continued fostering with additional monitoring. There have been no incidents of physical restraint were reported in 2019/20 and this is similar to 2018/19.

11. The Impact of Covid 19

11.1 Throughout the period covered by this Annual Report, the UK was dealing with the global pandemic. Along with the other services offered by the council, the Fostering Service had to adjust its approach. There were a number of areas that the lockdowns and restrictions affected the service and our foster carers. These included:

- Additional pressure on fostering households as children were spending more time at home and home schooling
- Children's access to education
- Access to support from family network
- Adjustment to undertaking many activities including meetings, visits and Fostering Panel through virtual platforms
- Changes to arrangements for children to see their families
- Reduction in the availability of fostering vacancies as foster carers are unable to include new fostered children in their households due to health vulnerabilities
- Impact on workforce – balancing work, home life, home schooling etc.

12. Service Priorities and Improvement – 2021/22

- Assess and approve 14 new mainstream fostering households
- Maximise the capacity of internal foster carers and increase the proportion of looked after children placed with internal foster carers
- Maintain an assertive and robust focus on marketing, recruitment and assessment of foster carers
- Extend the range of in-house fostering provision
- Increase range of support that is available to foster carers
- Complete Annual Foster Carer Survey
- Support & Stability Team is embedded and fully operational
- Launch Out of Hours Foster Carer Support Line
- 12 members of the Fostering Service to have completed DDP Level and go on to compete NATP 'train the trainer' course
- Confirm delivery model for NATP training to foster carers and workforce
- Grow Mockingbird Hubs from 3 to 6
- Continue to embed partnership working with Kinship (formerly Grandparents Plus)
- Complete 12 months of Case File Auditing and produce Annual Report Learning Report on this activity
- Continue to develop and embed the use of the Performance Dashboard
- Develop and embed the role of the Practice Improvement Manager
- Develop learning feedback loop for work into and out of Fostering Panel
- Review of SGO support and present an options paper to DMT for pre & post order SGO support.
- Present options paper to DMT on the arrangements for competing Annual Reviews

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