

Fostering Service Annual Report 2022-2023
--

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 This report summarises the activity of the Fostering Service from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023.
- 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 care, 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 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 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 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 for Provider Services, and they report to the Head of Service for Corporate Parenting & Provider Services. The primary objectives for role of Group Manager are:
- Responsible for the service planning and management of all local authority Fostering Services
 - Line Manager for the Residential Services Manager who has responsibility for the Local Authority children's homes
 - Line Manager for the Home Finding Team who are responsibility for finding external homes for Children in Care.

1.7 During this reporting period, the Fostering Service received investment to create the following posts:

- Training & Development Officer (part time)
- Senior Practitioner for the SGO Support Hub
- Social Worker (part time) for the SGO Support Hub
- 2 Child & Family Support Worker posts for the SGO Support Hub

2. Overview of Achievements in 2022/23:

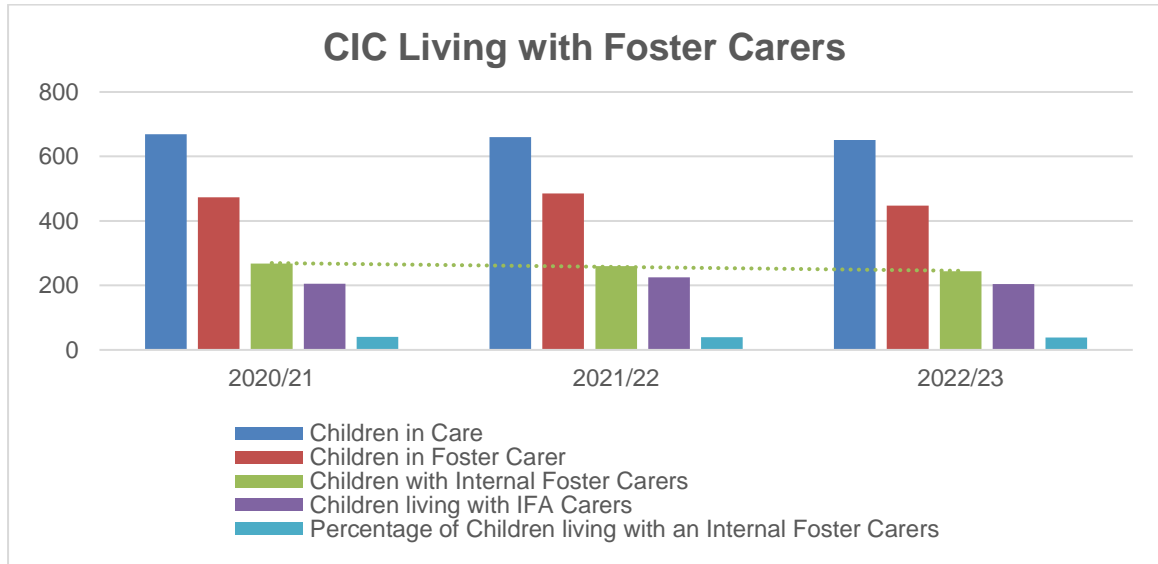
- Sustained workforce stability and reduced reliance on agency workers in the Fostering Service
- Launched the Foster Carer Telephone Support Line
- Increased the Fostering Fee Payment between 7.5% and 20%
- Increased weekly fostering allowances by 12.4%
- Increased additional allowances by 5%
- Increased the mileage rate for foster carers to 45p per mile
- Secured agreement that from April 2023, Walsall Foster Carers living in Walsall will be exempt from the Council Tax Charge
- Held Foster Carer Celebration Event
- Held Children's Party
- Collaborated with other LAs to produce the film 'Childhood'
- Supported Walsall Council to achieve Fostering Friendly Employer accreditation
- Recruited, assessed and approved 7 Mainstream Fostering Households
- Recruited, assessed and approved 16 Connected Fostering Households
- Foster Panel rated 82% of work to be Good or Outstanding
- Case File Auditing rated 90% of work to be Good or Outstanding
- Continued our partnership working with Kinship
- Improved securing permanence for children through SGO
- Improved quality & timeliness of connected person assessments
- Introduced Fostering Panel Feedback Loop
- All employees completed level 1 training in Dyadic Development Practice
- Continued our journey for Foster Carers to access Foundation to Attachment Training before progressing to Nurture & Attachment Training
- Continued to produce regular newsletters to both Foster Carers and SGO Carers

3. Children Living with Foster Carers

- 3.1 At the end of March 2023, of the **650** Children in Care, **448 (69%)** were living with Foster Carers of which **244 (37%)** were living with Walsall Foster Carers compared with **260 (39%)** at the end of March 2022.
- 3.2 As for Children in Care living with an IFA Foster Carer, on 31/3/23, there were **204** children living with an independent fostering agency (IFA) Foster Carer. This is a decrease from **250** in 2021/22.
- 3.3 On 31st March 2023, there were **177** approved internal fostering households (figure includes both mainstream & connected carers).

3.4 The breakdown of these households per category was:

- Mainstream Carers: 103
- Connected Carers: 72
- Foster for Adoption: 2
- Total – 177



3.5 In terms of the demographics for our Primary Foster Carers, as of 20/10/23, **83%** identify as female and **79%** report their ethnicity as White British. The age cohorts for these Foster Carers are recorded as follows :

- 20 - 29 = 5
- 30 - 39 = 33
- 40 - 49 = 46
- 50 - 59 = 55
- 60+ = 48

4. Foster Carer Recruitment & Retention – National & Local Picture:

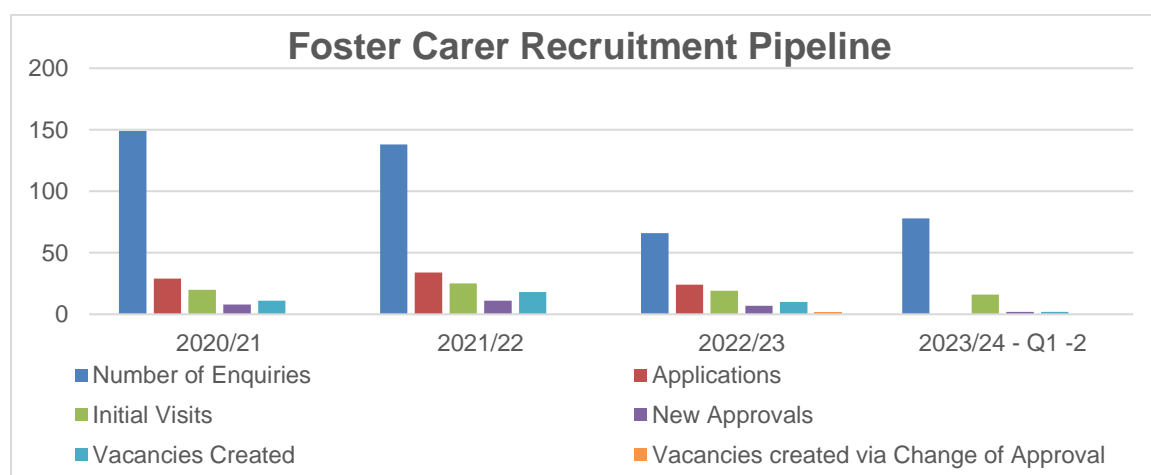
4.1 Walsall’s Fostering Service is operating in a highly competitive marketplace and the recruitment & retention of foster carers continues to be a significant challenge, both nationally and locally. In 2023 the Fostering Network published a report on Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention in England (Key Research Findings and Recommendations).

4.2 For both local authorities and independent fostering agencies, applications are at their lowest level in several years. Nationally, Local Authority applications have decreased by **22%** since 2018, and IFA applications have dropped by **21%** over the same period.

4.3 The recent report by Ofsted (2022) on fostering notes that the number of available fostering places in England has fallen by almost a quarter in four years.

In addition, the number of approved foster carers also dropped as more foster carers have left the sector.

- 4.4 There were 8,280 applications to become a foster carer – the lowest number in several years and down 21% from 2017-18 and more Mainstream Fostering Households deregistered than were approved (5,435 versus 4,035), leading to a decrease in fostering capacity nationally.
- 4.5 A further challenge to the sufficiency of internal Foster Care Homes is when our Foster Carers go on to secure a Special Guardianship 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/ vacancies for children.
- 4.6 The table below sets out the Foster Carer Recruitment Pipeline. Whilst the total number of enquiries was higher in years 2020/21 and 2021/22, conversion to approval for those years was **5%** and **8%** respectively.



- 4.7 However, whilst enquiries in 2022/23 were lower than in previous years, the conversion rate to approval was close to **11%**. In 2022/23, **14** prospective fostering households withdrew from the assessment process. Of the **14** withdrawn applications, **9** were withdrawn by the applicant and **5** were withdrawn by the service. Although the numbers used for this dataset are significantly lower, the percentage split on withdrawals is similar to that reported by Ofsted (2022).

5. Occupancy in Fostering Homes

- 5.1 Each year Ofsted asks local authority fostering services and independent fostering agencies for data about the children they provide homes for and the foster carers that look after them. This is the only national data collection that provides an overview of the national fostering landscape. All 151 local authority fostering agencies and around 280 independent fostering agencies (IFAs) are asked to provide data on:

- households that foster children for their agency
- data on complaints, allegations and recruitment

5.2 On 31st March 2023, there were 304 approved fostering places. Whilst this is lower than both outturns for 2020/21 and 2021/22, it is higher than our Statistical Neighbour and West Midlands average.

5.3 Of the 304 approved fostering places, 18 were vacant with further 42 not being available for a variety of reasons. These reasons are known and are now coded accordingly against the Ofsted criteria for this activity. Some examples of unavailable places are:

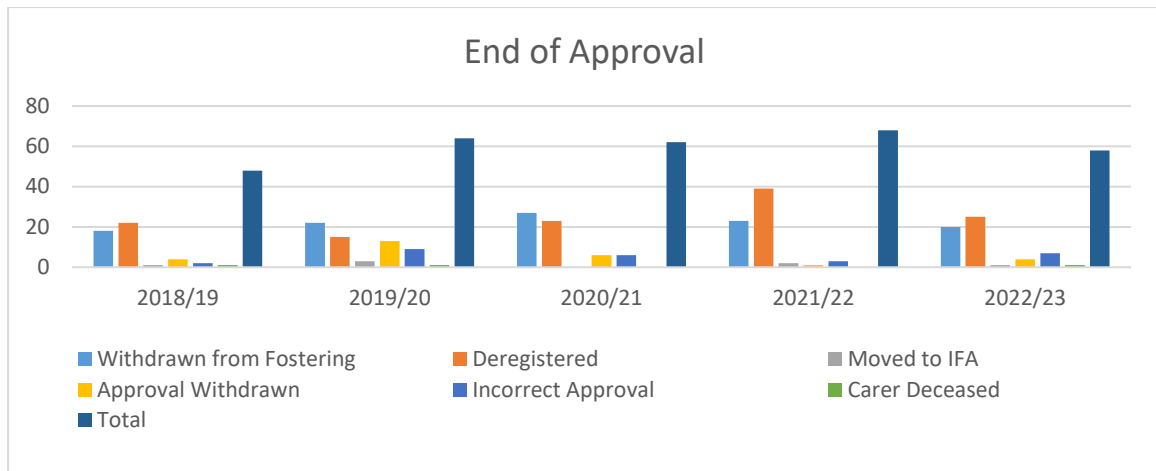
- Mockingbird Hub Carer (Linked to Approval Status – total 10)
- Only available if sibling group placed (Linked to Approval Status)
- Used by CYP Staying Put after turning 18
- Needs of child currently in placement
- Carer(s) taking a break/pending resignation
- Carer(s) under investigation
- Reserved for pending placement

5.4 The role of Home Finding Social Worker was created in April 2019 to support the efficient matching of in house foster carers to children requiring a foster home. The post holder has a close working relationship with the Home Finding Team and Foster Carers. This role has supported the service to maximise occupancy rates of in-house fostering households.

6. End of Foster Carer Approval:

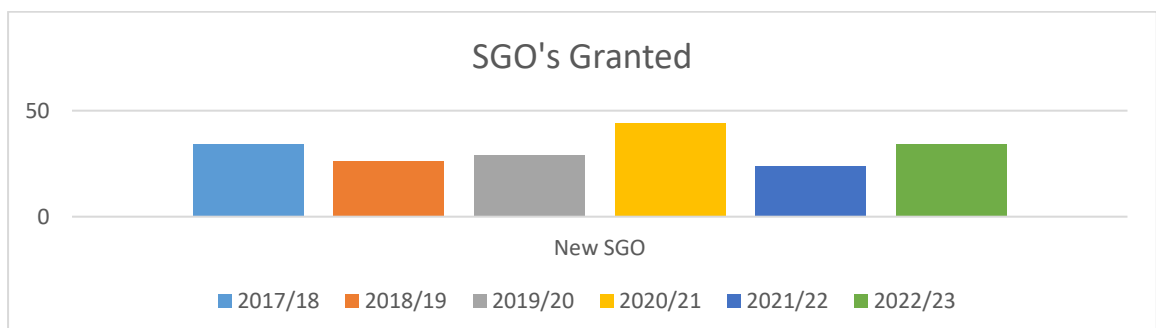
6.1 There are wide range of reasons as to why a Foster Carer's approval ends. These can range from their fostering career naturally coming to end, a change to family circumstances, concerns about the ongoing suitability, moving to become a Special Guardian and of course transferring to an IFA. The table below covers all of these scenarios and captures data for both Mainstream and Connected Foster Carers.

6.2 In terms of the retention of Mainstream Foster Carers, a previous area of concern was the number transferring to an independent fostering agency. Based on the table below, in the previous **5** years, **7** Foster Carers have opted to transfer. The Foster Carer who opted to transfer in 2022/23 did so for financial reasons. They initiated the process in May 2022, and they transferred in November 2022.



7. Connected Foster Care and Special Guardianship

- 7.1 In 202/23, **16** Connected Person Households were approved at Fostering Panel. This is a slight decrease on the **23** in 2021/22 but an increase from 2020/21 (**12**)
- 7.2 Connected Persons arrangements are often very complex situations with families struggling to come to terms with the reasons why children have become children in care. Connected Foster Carers receive the same level of supervision as mainstream carers, and they have access to Skills to Foster training which has been tailored specifically for Connected Persons carers.
- 7.3 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 promoting legal permanence through Special Guardianship for children for whom this is the preferred outcome.
- 7.4 On 31st March 2023, there were **346** children supported by their Special Guardians. This represents a **41%** increase to that of 31st March 2019. The total number of children is continuing to rise in 2023/24 (**358** as at 01/10/23). All Special Guardianship Assessments are completed by the Fostering Service.



8. Supervision, Support, Training & Development

- 8.1 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.
- 8.2 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.'
- 8.3 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 2023, The Fostering Service had supported 60 Foster Carers to complete the Foundations to Attachment Training.
- 8.4 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.
- 8.5 The Mockingbird Family Model continues to be a popular with Foster Carers. As of 31st March 2023, there were 5 live Mockingbird Constellations. The 6th Hub Carer has been appointed and the plan is to launch this constellation in Autumn 2023. The team also received recognition for their work going above and beyond from the wider council staff awards , being runners up in Proud to be One Team category.
- 8.6 The Fostering Service continue to produce and share regular, separate newsletters with Foster Carers and SGO Carers, and in early 2022/23, the Fostering Service moved the Monthly Support Groups from online to face to face events at Ryecroft Community Hub. In addition to this, all foster carers approved by Walsall Council are provided with membership of the Fostering Network.

9. Marketing & Promotional Activity

- 9.1 Without attracting additional Foster Carers and retaining existing ones, Walsall will not have a sufficient number of homes for existing Children in Care with locally based Foster Carers. Aligned to the strategy to have the right children living with right people at the right time, the aim of the Fostering Service's Transformation Plans is to have more children living with Walsall Foster Carers.

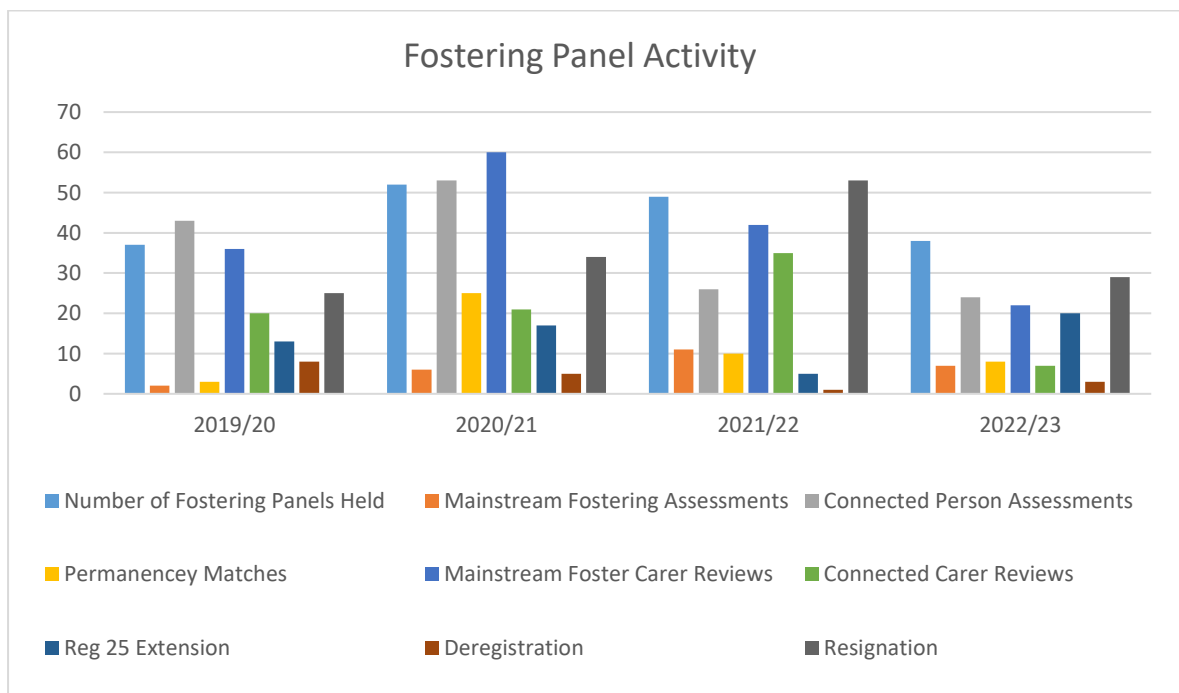
9.2 In 2022, the Fostering Service started to work with the Head of Service for Marketing and Communications Service to ensure our marketing and Communication Plan is focused. We have reviewed best practice and updated the Marketing & Communication Plan for 2023/24 and this is used to inform our targeted marketing activities.

10. Fostering Panel

10.1 Lisa Cawthorn has continued in her role as Chair of Fostering Panel and the Vice Chair is Sue Partoon.

10.2 Fostering Panel activity continues to be busy with the Panel meeting on 38 occasions. Panel was quorate on each occasion. The table below outlines the range of work discussed at Fostering Panel.

10.3 In 2022, as part of the Practice Improvement Framework, the Fostering Service introduced the Foster Panel Feedback Loop. This involves the Fostering Panel providing feedback on the quality of reports that are presented to Panel. Panel members are asked to comment on strengths and 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). In 2022/23, **82%** of items presented to panel were rated as Good or Outstanding - with **30%** being rated as Outstanding.



11. Service Priorities and Improvements – 2023/24 (Update)

11.1 As the Annual Report is only 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 2023/24, this includes:

- Walsall Foster Carers living in Walsall to be exempt from Council Tax Charge
- Ran and will rerun Foster Carer Recruitment Campaign on local radio
- Held a Foster Carer Celebration Event
- Introduced the use of Talking Circles for foster carers and staff
- Launched the New Horizons Fostering Scheme
- Launch 6th Mockingbird Hub
- Include Total Respect Training in Skills to Foster Training
- Recruited a Care Experienced individual to the Fostering Panel
- Mail shot to 4000 home addresses about Fostering for Walsall
- Ran promotional campaign in bus stops and on the rear of buses
- Installed 25 new promotional lamppost banners
- Update the Financial Policy for Permanence Arrangements
- Held Thank You Event for Special Guardians
- Launched the SGO Support Hub
- Marketing and recruitment activity is kept under review to ensure that impact of digital, social media and face to face recruitment is evaluated.
- Maximise the capacity of internal foster carers and increase the children placed internally.
- Strengthen the training and development offer to foster carers.

Author

Mark Burrows

Group Manager

mark.burrows@walsall.gov.uk