

Agenda Item No. 5

Personnel Committee – 11th September 2023

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 in 2023 by the Fostering Service on our recruitment and retention of foster carers.

2. Recommendations

Personnel Committee is recommended to ensure 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

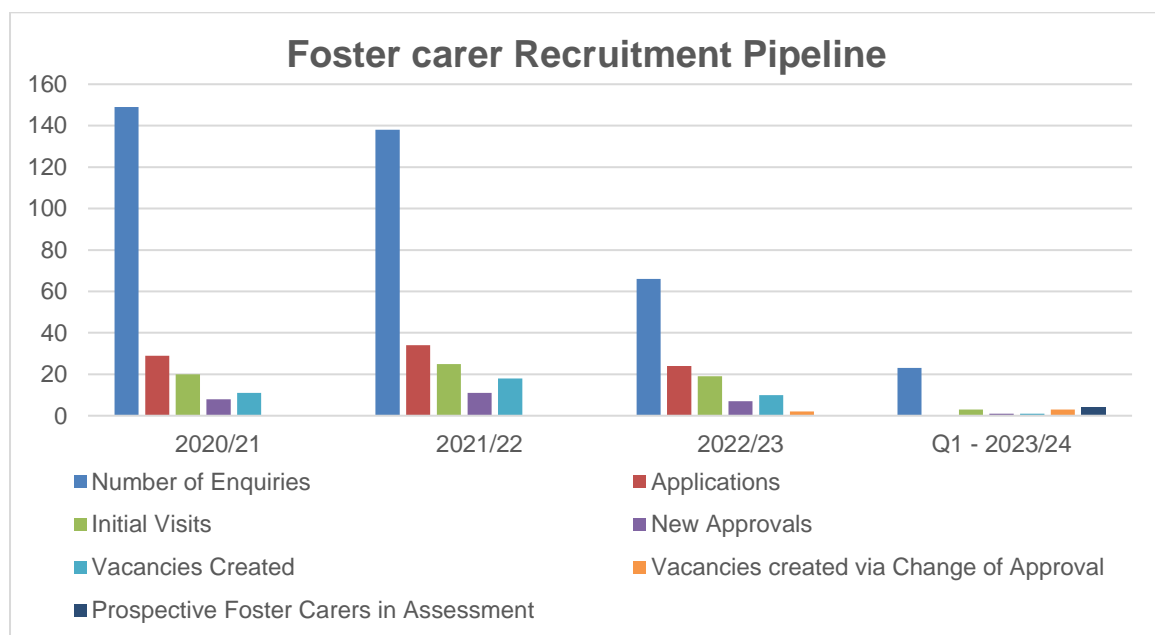
- 3.1 Foster carers are assessed and approved as either Mainstream or Connected Foster carer. A Connected Foster carer relates to those households who offer to provide care to a child known to them, usually a relative and are approved solely by Local Authorities. The Foster carers in this category sometimes 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 31st July 2023 there were:
 - 102 Mainstream Fostering Households
 - 78 Connected Fostering Households
 - 2 Foster for Adoption Households
- 3.3 The recruitment and retention of foster carers continues to be a significant challenge, both nationally and locally. In May 2023, the Fostering Network published a report on Foster Carer Recruitment and Retention in England (Key Research Findings and Recommendations). The research suggests that when applying to foster, individuals get in touch with multiple fostering services to find out more about the role and the support available. Each fostering service takes a

different approach to defining and counting enquiries (e.g. interactions on Facebook, phone calls, or visits), and an individual can enquire to various agencies or make multiple enquiries to the same agency. This can make the number of enquiries to foster appear higher and does not accurately reflect the number of individuals interested in fostering.

3.4 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. In both sectors, 2021 seems to have been an unusual year, with high numbers of enquiries and applications.

4. Recruitment of Mainstream Foster Carers in Walsall

4.1 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. This is in keeping with the information in the Ofsted Report which noted that ‘an increasing number of people have been making initial enquiries about becoming a foster carer but a decreasing proportion of them have gone on to make an application.’ However, when compared to 2022/23, although enquires were significantly lower than in previous years, the conversion rate to approval was close to **11%**.



4.2 To date in 2023/24, **1** new Fostering Household has been approved and there **4** prospective fostering households being assessed. **1** applicant is an employee with Walsall Council and their decision to apply was influenced by the Council obtaining Fostering Friendly Status in 2022. If enquiries Q1 (**23**) are matched in each quarter, then this would lead to **92** enquires for 2023/24 which in theory could lead to **9** new Fostering Households (10% conversion rate applied).

4.3 Regarding Walsall Council employees requesting to be assessed as foster carers, to date, just 1 has opted to progress this with the Fostering Service, with 1 other looking to submit a formal enquiry. 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 2020 and 2022, Walsall foster carers reported a high level of satisfaction, with **91%** reporting it to be 'Good' or 'Very Good' in 2020 and **80%** reporting it to be 'Good' or 'Very Good' in 2022.

5.5 **Fees & Allowances:** In late 2022, after consultation with foster carers, Children's Services increased the Fostering Fee by between 10% and 20%. The Weekly & Additional Allowances were also increased by approx 12.5%.

5.6 **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.

- 5.7 **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. Work is now underway to launch this Hub by September 2023.
- 5.8 **Foster carer Telephone Line:** In December 2022, the Fostering Service launched the foster carer Telephone Helpline. This is operated by members of staff from 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.
- 5.9 **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.
- 5.10 **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.
- 5.11 **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. Following on from this, the Fostering Service are now delivering Foundation to Attachment Training to all Foster carers. To date approximately 70 Foster carers have completed this training and further cohorts are due to start this in September 2023.
- 5.12 **Foster Carer Thank You Event:** In June 2022, the Fostering Service held a Thank You Event for our Foster carers. This was an Afternoon Tea at a local hotel & spa. The event was attended by 115 Foster carers and feedback from them about it was very positive.
- 5.13 **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.

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 April 2023, the Fostering Service have undertaken the following activities:

- Used paid social media advertising
- Included Fostering leaflet in all letters for Council Tax Bills
- Ran a radio campaign (April – August)
- Regular posts on social media accounts
- Fostering Takeover of Inside Walsall (to coincide with Fostering Fortnight)
- Article/ Advert in Express & Star newspaper (coincided with FF)
- Held face to face events at local libraries
- Held monthly online information webinars
- Attended/ information stand at Tesco
- Attended/ information stand at Pelsall Carnival
- 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 the Bloxwich Library Lego club.
- Attended/ information stand at Walsall Pride Festival
- Attended/ information stand at Birchills Mosque Fun Day

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

- 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
- Consider running a further radio campaign
- Launch refreshed Website

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 \(walsall.gov.uk\)](https://www.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, 1 employee is now in the process of being assessed and another employee is now at the point of making a formal enquiry. 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 2023/24 and 2024/25.

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Dated: 23.08.2023