

<p style="text-align: center;">The Fostering Service Annual Report 2021-2022</p>

1. Context (or background)

- 1.1 This report summarises the activity of the Fostering Service from 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022.
- 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 Foster 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 Children in Care of Walsall.

2. Overview of Achievements in 2021/22:

- Continued to deliver effective support throughout the Global Pandemic
- Sustained workforce stability and reduced reliance on agency workers in the Fostering Service
- Introduced Foster Carer Referral Fee Scheme

- Recruited more Foster Carers (11) than in previous 3 years
- Work to increase number of Mockingbird Hubs Carers to 6
- Continued our partnership working with Kinship
- Improved permanence for children through SGO
- Launched the Support and Stability Team
- Started our journey to have all employees trained in Dyadic Development Practice by October 2022
- Started our journey for Foster Carer to access Foundation to Attachment Training before progressing to Nurture & Attachment Training
- Completed 12 months of Case File Auditing
- Appointed to post of Practice Improvement Manager
- Secured agreement for further uplift on children's allowances for Foster Carers
- Continued to produce regular newsletters to both Foster Carers and SGO Carers

3. The Structure Of The Fostering Service

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
- 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 Children in Care.

3.1 During this reporting period, the following changes have been made to the Fostering Service Staffing Structure:

- Recruited to the Practice Improvement Manager post
- Created and recruited 4 new posts for the Support & Stability Team
- Created and recruited 2 new Child & Family Support Worker posts
- Created and recruited 1 new social worker to support Mockingbird
- Created 1.5 social work posts for Recruitment & Assessment Team.

4. Children Living with Foster Carers

4.1 There has been an increase in the numbers of Children in Care in Walsall over the past **5** years by **2%**; from **645** in 2017 to **661** in 2022; on 5th December 2022, there are **648** children in care.

4.2 On 31st March 2022, there were **196** approved internal fostering households (figure includes both mainstream & connected carers).

4.3 The breakdown of these households per category was:

- Mainstream Carers 121
- Connected Carers 75
- Total – 196

4.4 At the end of March 2022, of the **661** Children in Care, **502 (76%)** were living with Foster Carers of which **134 (27%)** were living with Walsall Foster Carers compared with **148** at the end of March 2021.

4.5 As for Children in Care living with an IFA Foster Carer, on 31/3/22, there were **250** children living with an independent fostering agency (IFA) Foster Carer. This is an increase from **239** in 2020/21

4.6 In terms of attempting to understand why we have fewer of our Children Carer living with in internal Foster Carers but more living with an IFA Carers, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (IRCSC) reported that:

Fostering is on the same trajectory of becoming increasingly privatised and consolidated in the hands of a few large providers (Competition and Markets Authority, 2022). The market share of independent fostering agencies (IFAs) is 41%, and the top six independent fostering agencies account for 51% of all foster homes (Ofsted, 2020).

4.7 The report also noted that in 2020/21 'Recruitment and retention among independent fostering agency services led to a net increase in capacity of 525 additional households and 765 additional foster care places. In contrast, there has been a decrease in capacity of 35 households and 325 places in local authorities over the same period (Ofsted 2021b).'

4.8 Recruitment of new Foster Carers continues to be a significant challenge nationally. A 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. The Ofsted report notes:

- Whilst the number of initial inquiries from prospective fosterers rose nationally by 18%, to 138,075 inquiries in the latest year, just 6% went on to apply (down from 9% in 2017-18).
- 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.

4.9 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 negatively on the number of available homes/ vacancies for children. Whilst this is also an option for an IFA Foster Carer to pursue, it is quite a rare occurrence. Another positive outcome for children that impacts negatively on sufficiency is when Foster Carers enter into Staying Put arrangements with the child. Again, whilst this is also an option for IFA Foster Carers, data at section 9 indicates that they enter into these arrangements in fewer numbers than Internal Foster Carers.

4.10 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.

5. Foster Carer Recruitment – National & Local Picture:

5.1 Walsall's Fostering Service is operating in a highly competitive marketplace, which has seen an exponential growth of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs). IFAs operate on a national and local basis actively seeking to recruit experienced and potential foster carers from across Walsall and surrounding areas. They offer higher financial rewards, other recruitment and retention incentives, one example being a retainer fee.

5.2 The recently published report on Independent Review of Children's Social Care (IRCSC) noted that:

'Nationally, there is not have enough foster carers. Over the last six years, there has been a 4% increase in the number of approved foster carers, whilst the number of children living in foster care has increased by 11% over the same period (Ofsted, 2021bw).'

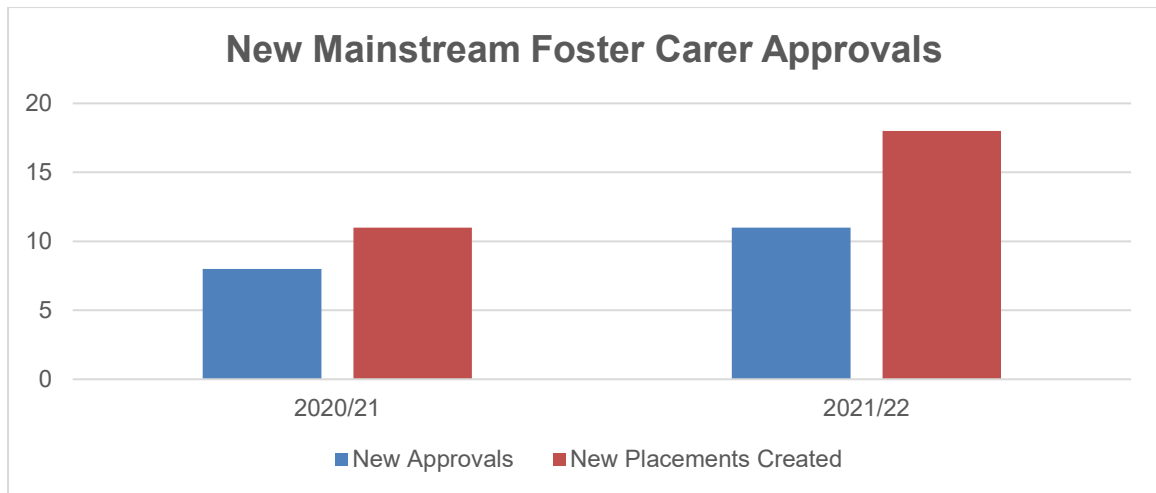
'There is a growing crisis in foster care recruitment. In the year ending March 2021, 160,635 families came forward to express an interest in becoming a foster carer, and yet just 2,165 were approved (Ofsted, 2021a) . . . and 'without major action, we expect that fostering will face the same acute market issues as residential care in the near future'

- 5.3 Like all other aspects of our society, the global pandemic also affected the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers. 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.
- 5.4 Specific demographics do have an impact on the recruitment of Mainstream Foster Cares. 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.
- 5.5 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).
- 5.6 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.
- 5.7 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.

6. Marketing, Recruitment and Mainstream Approvals

- 6.1 Without attracting additional Foster Carers and retaining existing ones, Walsall will not have a sufficient number of placements 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.
- 6.2 In terms of promotional activity, the global Coronavirus pandemic was still having an effect on this activity and the recruitment of Foster Carers in 2021/22. This meant any face-to face events were restricted 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. For 2022/23, we have reviewed our approach to face-to face events in line with both Central and Local Government advice and guidelines (see para 18.5 for list of face to events events that have taken place in 2022/23)

- 6.3 Fostering Network report that it is reasonable to expect a 10% conversation rate from Initial Enquiry Stage through to Approval Stage. Between April 2021 and March 2022, Walsall Council received **140** general enquiries from residents about foster care. Of these, **35** progressed to initial visits and following further checks, **11** of the **35** were approved as new foster carer households and this created up to **18** new vacancies for children to live with a Foster Carer. This conversation rate equates to **8%** from general enquiry to approval and **31%** from progression of assessment to approval.
- 6.4 In addition to the **11** new Mainstream Fostering Households, **23** Connected Person Households were recommended for approval at Fostering Panel.
- 6.5 In 2021, the Fostering Service introduced a referral fee of £500 which on approval of the applicant by Fostering Panel, was payable to the referrer. Of the 11 approved by Fostering Panel, 4 were referred through this initiative. This relatively small investment could lead to a significant long term cost avoidance for the Council. Importantly, it is also very encouraging news for children and their families in that it creates more opportunities for children to live and grow up in Walsall and have improved connections with their family and friends.
- 6.6 In terms of timescale of completing assessments, the Fostering Service aims to have these completed and approved at Fostering Panel within 16 weeks. From the Initial Enquiry Stage through to Panel Approval, the average timescale for the **11** new approvals in 2021/22 was 9 months.
- 6.7 As the total number of enquires that have progressed to approval is low at **11**, even the slightest delay by an applicant skews the overall timescale delay. In 2021/22, the average timescale was impacted by the personal circumstances for 2 of the applicants. One applicant did not want to undertake face to face visits during global pandemic and the other assessment was halted to allow for the applicants to have an extension added to their home. One assessment was reallocated due to the long-term sickness absence of the assessing social worker.
- 6.8 To monitor the progress of assessments and help understand the narrative and personal circumstances of each applicant, in 2022/23, the Recruitment & Assessment Team introduced and Recruitment Pipeline Tracking Document which is reviewed on a fortnightly basis with the Group Manager. Although the Fostering Service has managed to approve more new Foster Carers than in previous years and are on track to improve on the number of new approvals for 2022/23, balancing the need to recruit new mainstream foster carers against the changing personal circumstances, impact 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.



6.9 The Fostering Service have set the following recruitment targets:

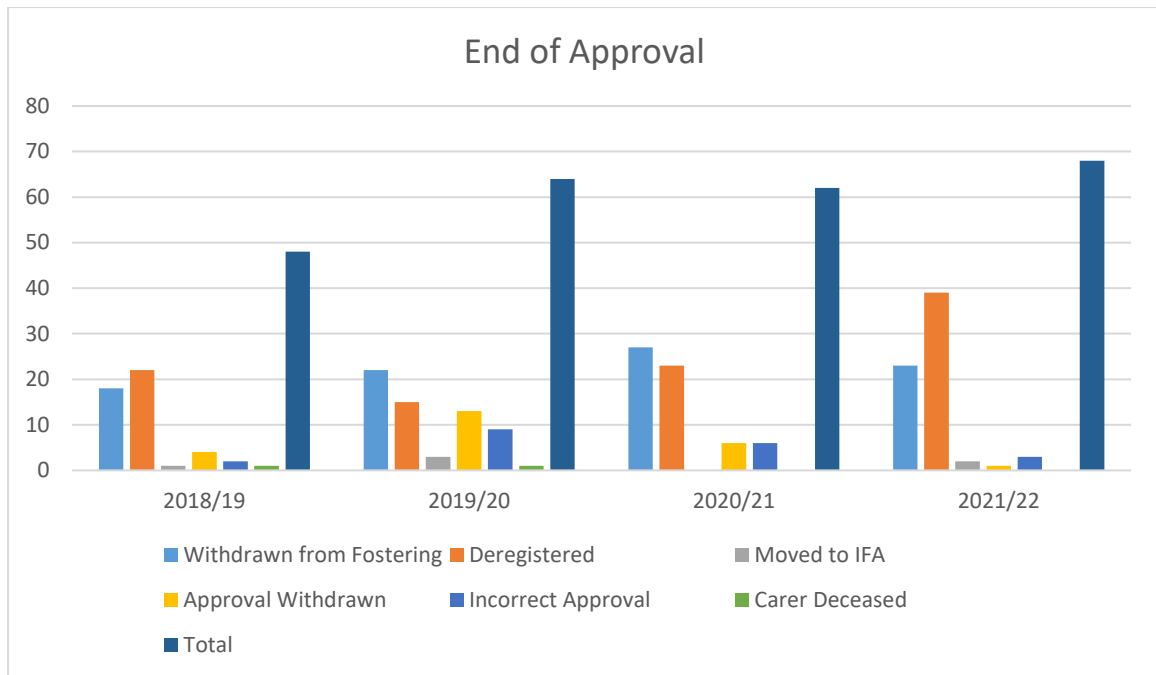
- 2022/23: 14 households with 18 beds
- 2023/24: 20 households with 25 beds
- 2024/25: 25 households with 30 beds

7. End of Foster Carer Approval:

7.1 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.

7.2 In terms of the retention of Foster Carers, an area of concern has been the number transferring to an independent fostering agency. Based on the table below, in the previous 4 years, six Foster Carers have opted to transfer. Interestingly, the two Foster Carers that transferred in 2021/22 did so early in that financial year and in order to do this, they would've had to start these arrangements in 2020; therefore, for approaching 18 months now, we have not had a Foster Carer inform the Fostering Service that they want to commence the transfer process to an IFA.

7.3 When it is right to do so, actively progressing the deregistration of a Foster Carer should not always be perceived as a negative action. As noted above, there are a range of reasons for this and if after consultation and the offer of support, fostering no longer suits their circumstances, progressing this swiftly then frees up the Supervising Social Worker and allows for further allocation of work.



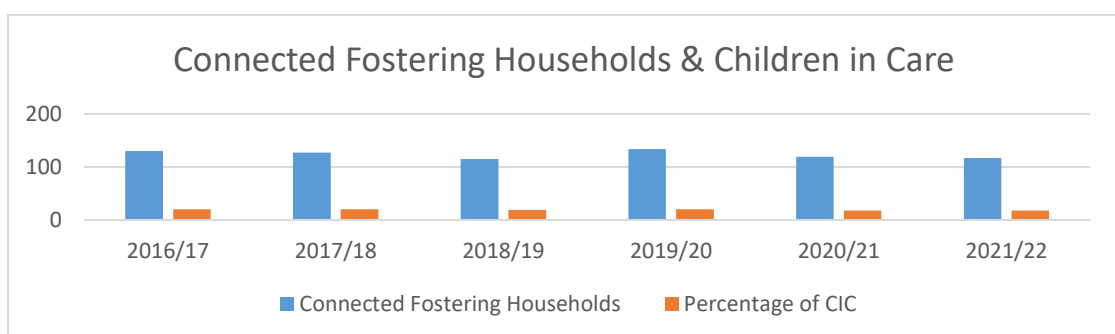
8. Occupancy of Mainstream Fostering Placements

8.1 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 placement. This role has supported the service to maximise occupancy rates of in-house household and the close working between the Fostering Service and the Home Finding Team is considered to be a contributory fact in maintaining this percentage. The situation is 'real time' and fluctuates daily. As of 2nd December 2022, a recent snapshot indicates that there are currently 3 available vacancies with our Mainstream Foster Carers. There were a further 6 vacancies not viable - these remain vacant are due to reasons of experience, skill set and approval status of Foster Cares in relation to the needs and age of children.

9. Connected Persons Fostering

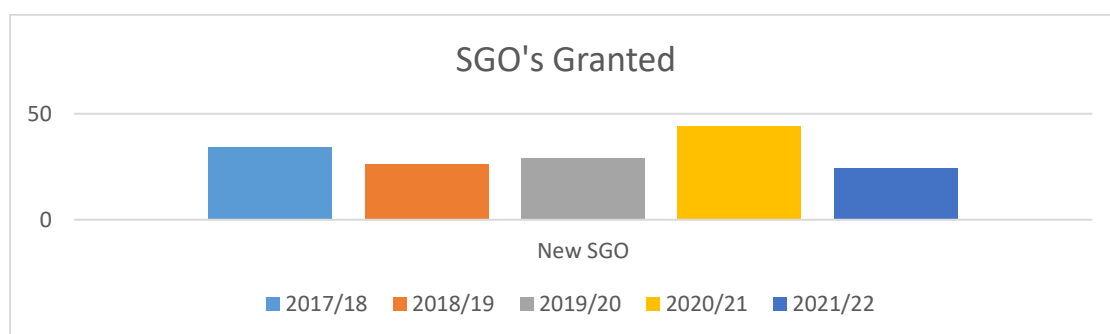
9.1 In 2021/22, **23** Connected Person Households were approved at Fostering Panel. This is an increase on the **12** in 2020/21 but a decrease from 2019/20 (**36**)

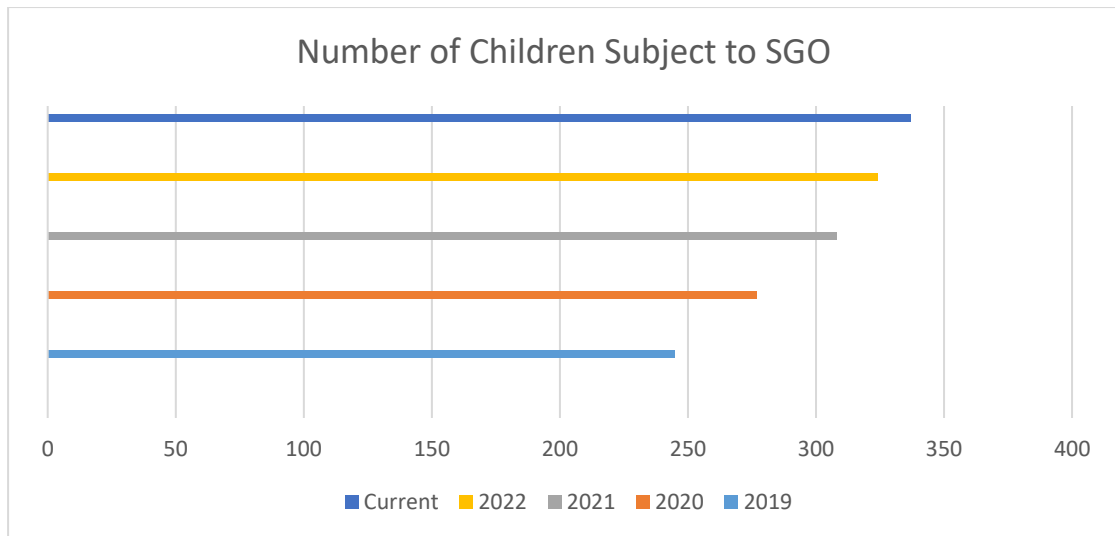
9.2 The chart below outlines the number of children living with Connected Carers.



10. Connected Foster Care & Special Guardianship

- 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 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.
- 10.3 In 2021/22, **9** Connected Carers were deregistered on the basis that they were now the Special Guardian for a child/ren. The **13** children who had been living with their Connected Carer ceased being Children in Care.
- 10.4 The tables below outline 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.
- 10.5 On 31st March 2022, there were **324** children supported by their Special Guardians. This represents a **34%** increase to that of 31st March 2019. The total number of children is continuing to rise in 2022/23 (**337** as at 01/09/22).





10.6 As the numbers of children being supported by a Special Guardian continue to grow, the Fostering Service completed a self-assessment regarding the offer of support to Special Guardians; both pre and post order. Based on the Self-Assessment, a report was presented to DMT, this was with the aim of understanding what work is recommended to:

- Improve the offer of support to Special Guardians
- Strengthen the arrangements that help achieve permanence
- Improve children’s life chances

9.7 A Task & Finish Group is now progressing this work with a view to an update report being returned to DMT

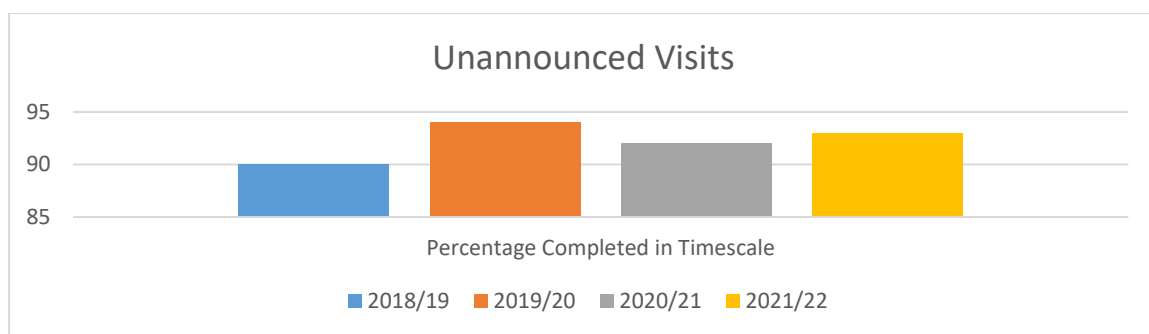
11. Supervision, Support, Training & Development

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 plan is for the whole workforce to complete DDP1 and for a smaller cohort go on to complete DDP2. This smaller cohort will also complete the ‘train the trainer’ sessions for Foundation to Attachment. When complete, this group will then deliver Foundation to Attachment Training then Nurture and Attachment Training (NATP) to all Foster Carers.

- 11.4 To complete this training requires a significant amount of commitment from both the Fostering Service and foster carers. DDP1 and DDP 2 requires an individual to complete 8 full days of training; the 'Train the Trainer' initiative is a further 4 full days. For a foster care to complete Foundations to Attachment, Training they will need to attend 7 half day sessions which will be delivered by the Fostering Service. The Fostering Service is on track to have the whole workforce trained at DDP Level 1 by October 2022 and to have 60 Foster Carers complete Foundations to Attachment Training by March 2023.
- 11.5 According to the Fostering Service Regulations, at least one unannounced visit is undertaken to each fostering household each year. Unannounced visits are recorded on Mosaic, monitored by the Team Manager, the Annual Review process and the use of PowerBi Reports.
- 11.6 In 2021/22 compliance at the end of the financial year was **93.3%**



- 11.7 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.
- 11.8 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 for the bulk of 2021/22. This training is also offered separately to Connected Person Foster Carers.
- 11.9 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. Based on the Annual Ofsted Fostering Return, we know that of the 325 foster carers that were approved on 31st March 2021:

Status		Number
TSD1	Not yet commenced	56
TSD2	Training in progress	37
TSD3	Awaiting sign off	4
TSD4	Workbook completed	202

11.10 The Fostering Service introduced Monthly Support Groups for our Foster Carers. In 2021/22 these took place virtually (morning & evening sessions) and are arranged and led by the Senior Practitioners. All Foster Carers are invited to attend. In early 2022/23, these moved to face to face events which are held at Ryecroft Community Hub. Foster Carers are welcome to bring young children with them and it has been reported that attendance appears to be improving improved. Sessions are both themed and non-themed. Themed sessions have covered:

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

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

11.12 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.

11.13 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.

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

12. Mockingbird Family Model

12.1 As of 31st March 2022, there were 3 live Mockingbird Constellations. The plan is to grow the number of Hub Carers to 6 by March 2023. As of 1/10/22, the current position is as follows:

- Hubs – 5
- Hub Carers 8
- Satellite homes - 32
- Foster Carers - 68
- Children in Care - 51

- Adopted children - 5
- Children subject to SGO -1
- Birth Children - 28
- Adult household members - 13
- Totalling - 207 people

12.2 We have some fantastic practice taking place in Mockingbird. In November 2021 we held our first joint social event across the 3 hubs with around 90 people attending making connections within the hubs. This was a great team effort, both within the Mockingbird team and with our Hub carers. Also, existing hubs play a significant role in the support and development of our new hub carers.

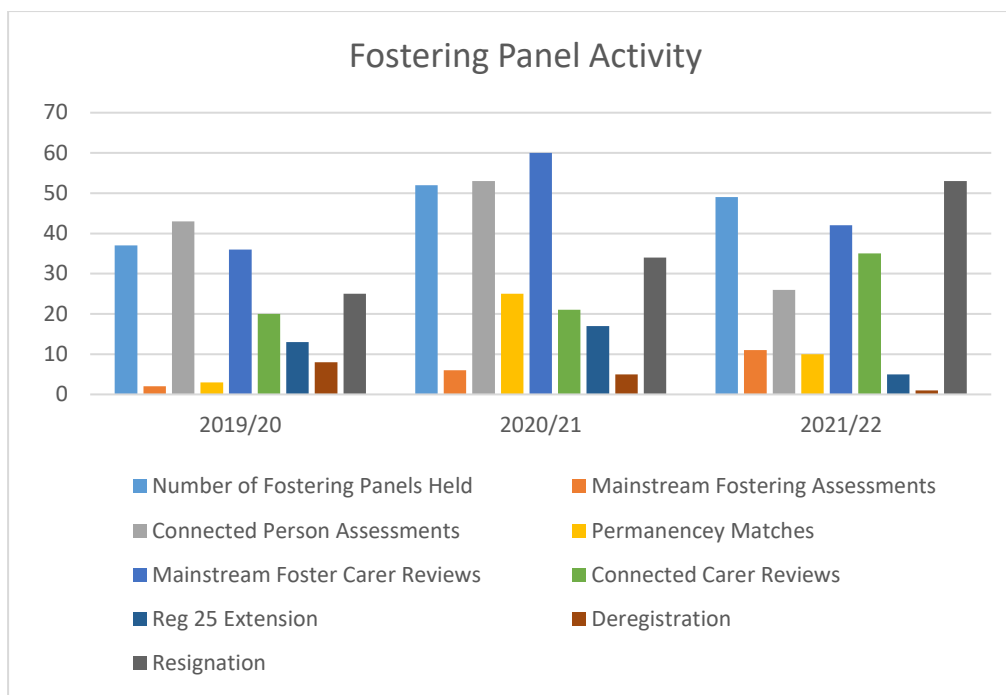
12.3 As for developments post this reporting period, in April 2022, the team launched 'teen events' which are to be held 3-4 times a year, so far, feedback from the young people attending is positive. The men's group has also launched and is successful running alternative virtual and face to face meet ups. The hubs joined together to celebrate the Queens jubilee in June 2022, attended by around 90 people across the hubs. This was a fantastic day and enjoyed by all.

12.4 In August 2022, the hubs came together for a day at the seaside, attended by over 60 people across the hubs. Also in August, social workers, hub carer, a foster carer and 8 children attended the Roost event which was organised by the Fostering Network.

13. Fostering Panel

13.1 Lisa Cawthorn has continued in her role as Chair of Fostering Panel and there are two Vice Chairs, Sue Partoon and Catherine Mitchley.

13.2 Fostering Panel activity continues to be busy with the Panel meeting on 49 occasions. Panel was quorate on each occasion. The table below outlines the range of work discussed at Fostering Panel.



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 in 2019/20, 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 of 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.

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 Of the **291** young people with status as a Care Leaver, at 31st March 2022, **41 (14%)** of care leavers age 19 and 20 were in a fostering placement when leaving care. **16** of these were with former foster carers, of which **5** were from IFAs, **8** from Internal Fostering and **3** from connected care.

14.3 At the end of November 2022 there were **29** young people aged 18 to 21 years living with their former foster carers under staying put arrangements.

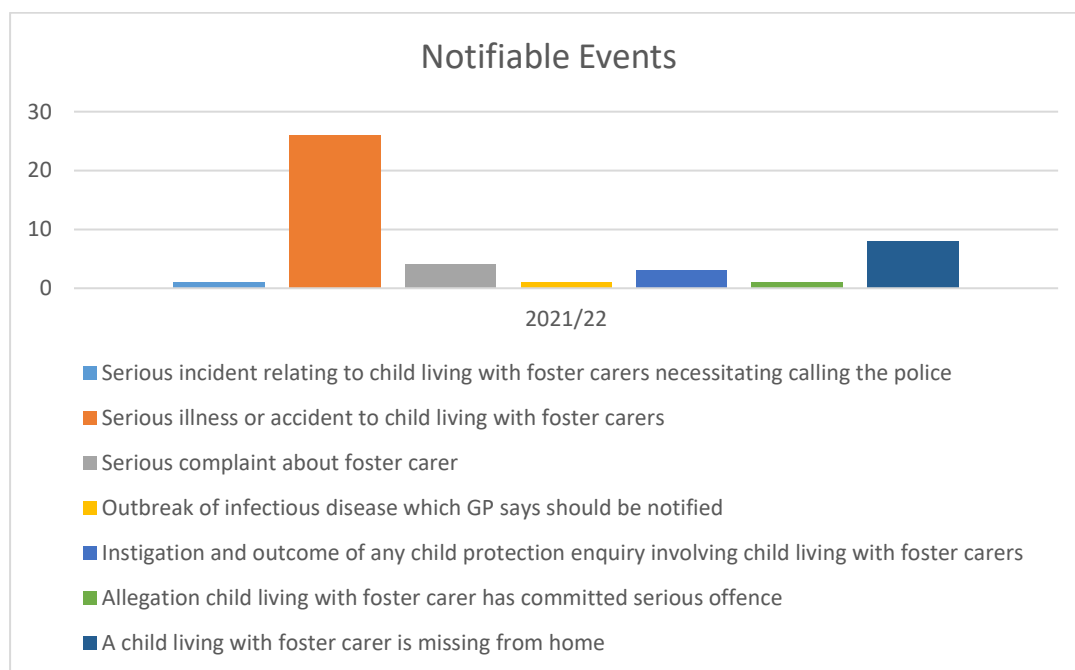
15. Complaints

15.1 During 2021/22, the Fostering Service received 3 complaints; 2 from parents; 1 from approved foster carers. The reason for the complaints were:

- Complaint about management of child's care whilst in her first foster home, an inappropriate child placed in same placement. The outcome was that the complaint was partially upheld; resolved at Stage 1.
- The Local Authority failed to follow due process when making care plans to move children from a settled placement and discrimination against foster parents. The outcome was that the complaint was not upheld at Stage 1 and the complaint has proceeded to Stage 2 investigation which is in progress.
- Concerns about appropriateness and conduct of Foster Carers.

16. Notifiable Events

16.1 In 2021/22, there were 44 Notifiable Events (Regulation 36, Schedule 7 of the Fostering Service Regulations 2011). The majority (**59%**) related a child being unwell or having an accident. The table below provides an overview of the other categories.



16.2 There were four allegations against Local Authority Foster Carers. Of these, three resulted in Section 47 enquiries being made and Position of Trust Meetings were held. 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 reported in 2021/222 which is similar to previous years.

17.0 The Impact of Covid 19

17.1 Throughout the period covered by this Annual Report, the UK was still 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 were unable to include new fostered children in their households due to health vulnerabilities
- Impact on workforce – balancing work, home life, home schooling etc.

18.0 Service Priorities and Improvements – 2022/23 (Update)

18.1 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 18 months to 2 years old; as such, the next section is an attempt to outline the range of work that has or is planned to take place in 2022/23.

18.2 Improving the Fees & Allowances:

- In summer 2022, DMT agreed to the request for additional investment to improve the financial support to Foster Carers. In September 2022, the Fostering Service completed a consultation exercise with Foster Carers on the initial proposals to revise the Fostering Fee Scheme which has been operational since 2018.
- In addition there has been agreement for 5% uplift to the weekly allowances paid to meet children's day to day needs from 1st October 2022 as well as an increase to the mileage allowance to 45p per mile. The decision to increase allowances by 5% is by far the greatest uplift to this allowance in several years, and again evidences the Council's commitment to improving the offer of financial support for Foster Carers to meet the day to day needs of our children.
- Establish two new fostering schemes for Parent & Child and Step into Fostering.
- In November 2022, a further report was returned to DMT which outlined a revised position on how best to distribute the investment differently. Importantly, this revision was shaped by Foster Carer feedback and input. DMT supported

the recommendations in the report and the new Fee Scheme will be implemented By January 2022.

18.3 Increase the range and offer of support that is available to Foster Carers:

- Children's Party & Foster Carer Celebration Event: The Fostering Service held a Children's party in April 2022 and a Foster Carer Celebration in June 2022. Both events were welcomed and enjoyed by our Foster Carers and both will be repeated again in 2023.
- Out of Hours Foster Carer Support Line: On 1st December 2022, the Fostering Service launched a trail of the Out of Hours Foster Carer Support Line. This is operated by a mix of staff from the Fostering Service and Foster Carers.
- Foundation to Attachment Training: The Fostering Service are now delivering Foundation to Attachment Training to all Foster Carers. To date 3 cohorts have completed this training and 2 further cohorts are to start in 2023. Feedback from those who have attended has been very positive and to afford Foster Carers with an opportunity to continue with their learning, they will be encouraged to attend the 'Talking Circle' sessions that are to launch in early.
- Council Tax Charge Exemption: From April 2023, our Foster Carers who live in Walsall will be exempt from paying the Council Tax Charge. 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. This is a significant benefit to this cohort of Foster Carers. Based on 2022/23 Council Tax Charge rates represents an annual saving to the Fostering Household of between £1,455.61 and £4,366.83. Further work is planned to explore how this benefit can be extended to those Walsall Foster Carers who live outside of the Borough.
- 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.
- Foster Carer Newsletters: To improve how we communicate and connect with Foster Carers, the Fostering Service continues to produce quarterly newsletters for Foster Carers. A separate quarterly newsletter is also produced for Special Guardians.
- Discount to access leisure facilities: Walsall children in care are entitled to free access to leisure facilities owned and operated by Walsall Council. Their foster carers also receive qualifying access to the Move It discount scheme which enables them to access heavily discounted leisure centre activities.

- Mockingbird: The Fostering Service has recruited its 6th Mockingbird Hub Carer. Work is now underway to launch this Hub by March 2023..
- Support & Stability Team: In early January 2022, the Fostering Service launched the newly created Support & Stability Team. The team consists of:
 - 1 x Senior Practitioner
 - 2 x Children & Family Support Workers
 - 1 x Targeted Youth Worker
- The purpose of this team is to provide support to existing 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. They also work identify best use of Foster Carers to meet needs of children who require an internal foster home. The work of this team links to the activity of a Service Transformation Plan and on 1st December 2022, the team were track to realise the benefit target for 2022/23.

18.4 Workforce Stability & Development:

- Stable & Confident Workforce: A key ingredient to offering support to Foster Carers is having a stable and confident workforce. I'm delighted to report that on 10th October 2022, 95% of posts in the Fostering Service were filled on a permanent basis. The other 5% were occupied by 2 agency social workers who were being used to cover the duties of 2 colleagues away from work due to long term sickness absence. As the recruitment and retention of social workers is notoriously challenging, this is a significant achievement for the Fostering Service and one that makes such a difference to our Foster Carers and the children they care for.
- Clear Approach to Practice: I'm proud to report that The Fostering Service now has a clear approach to practice that is rooted in nurture, attachment and recognises the impact of developmental trauma. In a 12-month period, the workforce has completed a total of 256 days focused training:
 - Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) Level 1 Training (40 staff x 4 days each)
 - Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) Level 2 Training (12 staff x 4 days)
 - Foundations to Attachment/ Nurture & Attachment 'Train the Trainer' (12 staff who have completed DDP2 - 3 days each)
- The commissioning and completion of this this training in a 12-month period is recognised as not just a significant achievement but also another one of the Fostering Service's unique selling points that and can be used in future marketing and promotional activity.

- To ensure that this training initiative becomes embedded in practice, with the support of a colleague from Workforce Development, we are in the process of establishing quarterly DDP Practitioner Forums. These forums will provide the workforce with an opportunity to refresh their learning and share examples of how they are making use of this training to inform their practice.
- Practice Improvement: The Fostering Service have recently introduced a Practice Improvement Framework. This aims to pull together the learning from Case File Audits, Fostering Panel and Learning Reviews to support practice development across the workforce which in turn will strength the support to our Foster Carers and improv ethe outcomes for our children.

18.5 Foster Carer Recruitment:

- Promotional & Marketing Material: With the help of colleagues in the Marketing and Communications Service, the Fostering Service have refreshed the Marketing Plan & Communication Plan and this will be used to inform some targeted marketing activities in 2023.
- An overview of the branding used for the Fostering Service currently reflects that ideally in the longer term a rebrand is required, however this isn't the right time to do that. The brand is currently known and reflected on campaign materials and assets and has recently been used to advertise on Walsall Council's waste collection vehicles. It makes sense to continue by raising awareness using the existing branding. In the short term however, some work has been completed to sharpen up the font and the development of straplines, hierarchy of messaging and general layout to ensure maximum impact is gained from the current look and feel.



- Return to Face-to-Face Promotional Activity: As Covid 19 restrictions lifted, this afforded the Fostering Service with the opportunity to engage face-to-face with

prospective Foster Carers. More recently, the Fostering Service have undertaken the following face to face promotional work:

- Attended Walsall Pride on 27/8/22
 - Attended the Walsall Works EXPO Event at Walsall College on 14/9/22
 - Provided advice & Information in foyer of Tesco branch on 1/10/22
 - Held monthly promotional sessions in local libraries (monthly rota in place)
 - Attended Learning Alliance Event on 6th October
 - Attended event at Walsall College on 14th October.
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- Fostering Friendly Accreditation: Walsall Council recently secured accreditation from The Fostering Network to promote itself as a Fostering Friendly Employer (FFE).
 - Recruitment Campaign January 2023: As we have now achieved FFE Status and have improve the range of support to our Foster Carers, starting in January 2023, the Fostering Service will be undertaking focused recruitment activity to target the whole Council workforce.
 - Recruitment of new Mainstream Foster Carers:
 - As noted elsewhere in this report, there are significant challenges to the recruitment of Mainstream Foster Carer. The Fostering Service have a target to recruitment, assess and approve 14 new mainstream fostering households in 2022/23. To date, 4 new fostering households have been approved and there are a further 10 at different stages in the recruitment pipeline. Due to personal reasons, several other applicants have opted out of the assessment process in this period.
 - New Fostering Schemes: Funding has since been secure to create 2 new Foster Schemes – Parent & Child and Step In to Fostering. Recruitment to these schemes will start in 2023. The need for an Emergency Foster Care Scheme is also being explored.

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