

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Walsall Fostering Service Annual Report 2023-2024</b></p>
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## **1. Context (or background)**

- 1.1 This report summarises the activity of the Fostering Service from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.
- 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 our care, it is preferable that they are live 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, and they report to the Head of Service for Provider Services. The primary objective for role of Group Manager is the responsibility for the service planning and management of all local authority Fostering Services.
- 1.7 There are 6 teams in the Fostering Service. Whilst they cover different areas of the fostering task, the overall purpose is to assess, support and develop foster carers and special guardians and to help secure permanency for children via long-term fostering and special guardianship. The Teams are:

- Recruitment & Assessment
- Support & Stability (based in R&A Team)
- Support & Development 1
- Support & Development 2 (Mockingbird)
- Connected Persons
- SGO Support Hub (based in CP Team)

1.8 Also working across the service is a Practice Improvement Manager and an Independent Fostering Reviewing Officer. The Practice Improvement Manager takes responsibility for the arrangements and operation of the Fostering Panel.

1.9 During this reporting period, the Fostering Service recruited to the following new posts:

- Senior Practitioner for the SGO Support Hub
- Social Worker for the SGO Support Hub
- 2 Child & Family Support Worker posts for the SGO Support Hub

## **2. Overview of Achievements in 2023/24:**

- Sustained workforce stability and reduced reliance on agency workers in the Fostering Service
- Introduced the New Horizon Fostering Scheme
- Launched the SGO Support Hub
- Updated the policy for Financial Support for Permanence Arrangements
- Received a positive report from DfE Fosterlink Diagnostic Initiative
- Maintained the Foster Carer Out of Hours Telephone Support Line
- Increased weekly fostering allowances and additional allowances by 4%
- Introduced the Council Tax Exemption Scheme for Walsall Foster Carers living in Walsall
- Held a Foster Carer Celebration Event
- Collaborated with other LAs to produce the film 'Any of Us'
- Increased the number of enquiries from prospective fostering households
- Recruited, assessed and approved **8** Mainstream Fostering Households
- Recruited, assessed and approved **19** Connected Fostering Households
- Foster Panel rated **93%** of work to be Good (**28%**) or Outstanding (**65%**)
- Case File Auditing rated **89%** of work to be Good or Outstanding
- Extended our partnership working arrangements with the charity Kinship
- Securing permanence for children through SGO
- Maintained the quality & timeliness of connected person assessments
- Commissioned Theraplay Level 1 Training for 27 employees
- 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

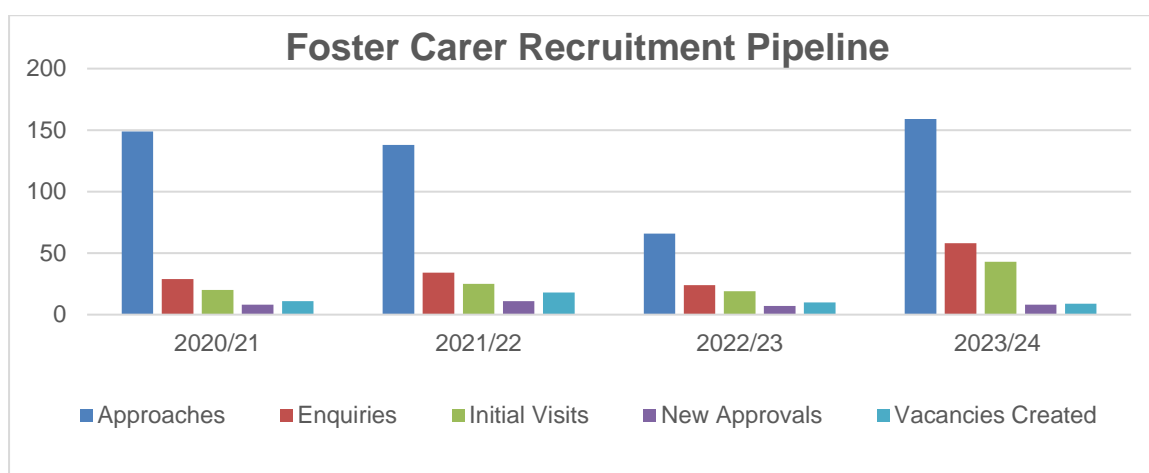
### **2.1 Recruitment & Retention of Foster Carers – National & Local Picture:**

- 2.2 Walsall's Fostering Service is operating in a highly competitive marketplace and the recruitment & retention of mainstream foster carers continues to be a significant challenge, both nationally and locally.
- 2.3 Ofsted National Statistics for Fostering in England 2022/23 noted that at the end of March 2023, there were around 43,400 fostering households in England. This total has remained fairly stable over the last 5 years, but the make-up has altered. Since 2019, the number of mainstream LA households has fallen by **11%**, and the number of family and friends households has increased by **21%**. The number of IFA households has not changed substantially. The largest subset of fostering households continues to be mainstream LA households, which currently account for **46%** of the total.
- 2.4 At the end of March 2023, Connected Fostering households (sometimes known as kinship foster care) accounted for **19%** of all active fostering households, an increase from **16%** in 2019.
- 2.5 Since 2019, the number of approved mainstream fostering households has fallen by **7%**. There was no substantial change until 2021 to 2022, when the number decreased in both the LA and IFA sectors. In 2022/23 there has been a **5%** decrease in the number of LA households, and very little change in the number of IFA households.
- 2.6 The IFA sector now accounts for **43%** of mainstream fostering households, up from **40%** in 2019. In 2019, IFAs accounted for **42%** of all filled mainstream fostering places. In 2023, this had risen to **47%**.
- 2.7 The number of applications received from prospective fostering households in 2022 to 2023 was around 8,000. This is the lowest number in several years and is **18%** lower than 2018 to 2019. This year, the proportion of approved applications has returned to its previous level after dropping last year. Similarly, the proportion of withdrawn applications has returned to its previous level. At the end of March 2023, there were around 3,800 newly approved mainstream households. This represented a **26%** decrease compared with 2019.
- 2.8 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, there were around 72,800 approved mainstream fostering places. Since 2019, the number of vacant mainstream places has decreased by **25%**. The most substantial decrease in vacant fostering places over this period has been in the LA sector, where the number has fallen by **29%**.
- 2.9 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.

2.10 Given the challenges to recruiting new foster carers, the Fostering Network Report argues that the ‘best recruitment strategy is good retention of foster carers’, this was explicitly expressed in the research. It contests that ‘it does not matter how many new foster carers are recruited if they cannot provide quality care to meet the needs of children in care, or if those who can provide the quality care are not retained.’

2.11 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

2.12 The table below sets out the Foster Carer Recruitment Pipeline. The total number of approaches, enquiries and home visits for 2023/24 are the highest they have been in 4-year period and the conversion rate from Enquiry to Approval was **14%**.



2.13 In 2023/24, **23** prospective mainstream fostering households withdrew or were withdrawn from the assessment process. Of the **23** withdrawn applications, **8** were withdrawn by the applicant and **15** were ended/ withdrawn by the service.

### 3. New Horizon Fostering Scheme

3.1 In May 2023, the New Horizon Fostering Scheme was launched. The aim of this scheme was to recruit foster carers who had the skill set and experience to care for children moving on from living in a Children’s Home. On 31<sup>st</sup> March there were **2** New Horizon Fostering Households and both had a child living with them. Whilst this new fostering initiative is very much about children having more options to live in a family environment, it also results in cost avoidance for Children’s Services.

### 4. Walsall Children Living with Foster Carers

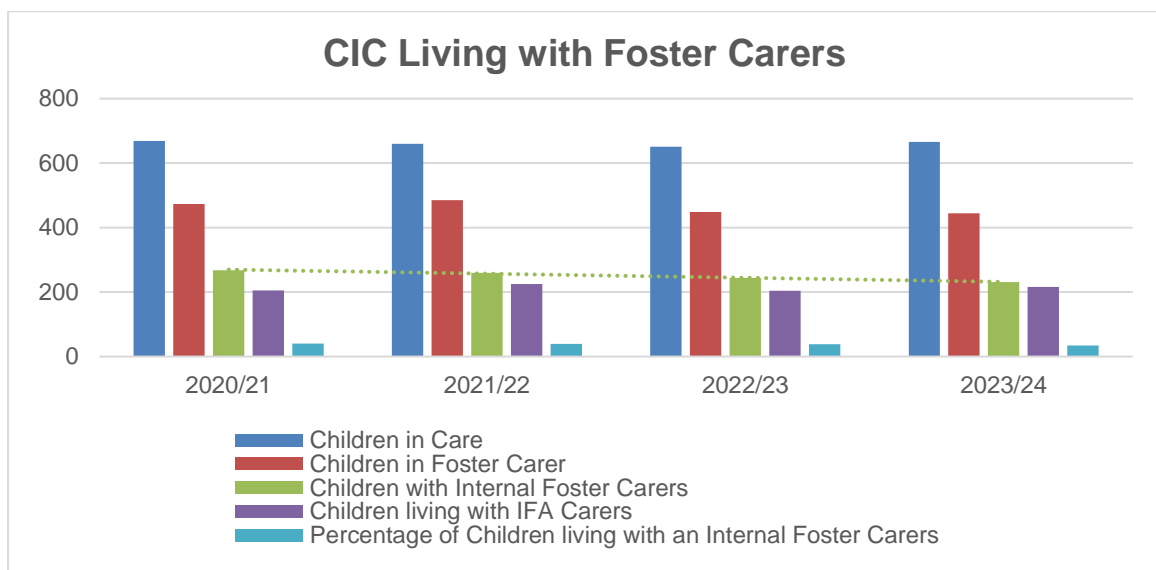
4.1 At the end of March 2024, of the **666** Children in our Care, **444 (67%)** were living with Foster Carers of which **231 (34%)** were living with Walsall Foster Carers compared with **244 (37%)** at the end of March 2023.

4.2 As for Children in Care living with an IFA Foster Carer, on 31/3/24, there were **216** children living with an independent fostering agency (IFA) Foster Carer. This is an increase from **204** in 2022/23.

4.3 On 31st March 2024, there were **176** approved internal fostering households (figure includes both mainstream & connected carers).

4.4 The breakdown of these households per category was:

- Mainstream Carers: 101
- Connected Carers: 74
- Foster for Adoption: 1
- Total – 176



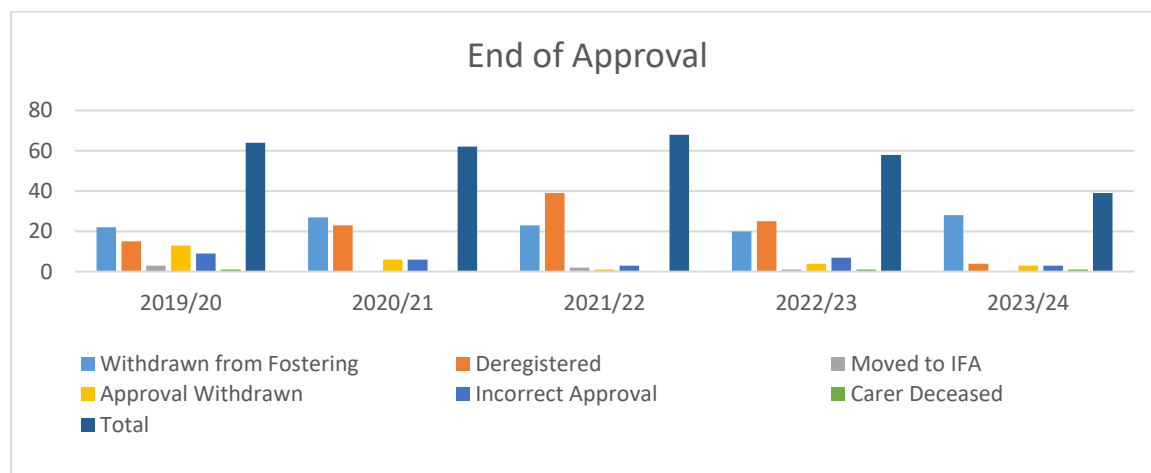
## 5. End of Foster Carer Approval:

5.1 There are a 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.

5.2 In terms of the retention of Mainstream Foster Carers, a previous area of concern was the number of Walsall Foster Carers transferring to an Independent Fostering Agency. Based on the table below, in the previous **5** years, **6** Foster Carers have opted to transfer. No Foster Carers have transferred to an IFA in 2023/24 and 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.

5.3 The number of approvals ending in 2023/24 is the lowest in a 5-year period and represents a **32%** reduction on the previous year. Of the 39 approvals ending, **9**

of these relating to Fostering for Adoption carers and **8** related to carers moving to be Special Guardians.

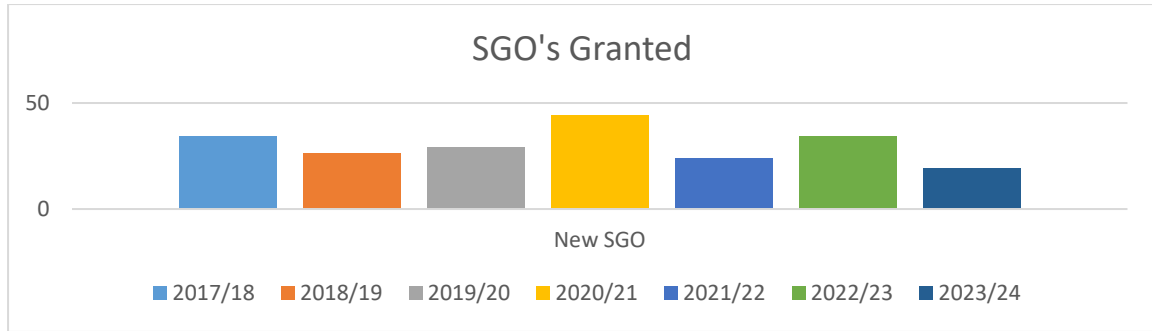


## 6. Connected Foster Care

- 6.1 As noted elsewhere in this report, as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024 there were **74** approved Connected Fostering households. In 2023/24, **19** Connected Fostering households were approved at Fostering Panel which is slightly more than in 2022/23 (**18**) and is greater than the **8** in 2021/22.
- 6.2 Connected Fostering 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. Special Guardianship and other Kinship Arrangements

- 7.1 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 promote legal permanence through Special Guardianship for children for whom this is the preferred outcome.
- 7.2 On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, there were **359** children supported by their Special Guardians. This represents a **12.2%** increase to that of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021. All Special Guardianship Assessments are completed by the Fostering Service.



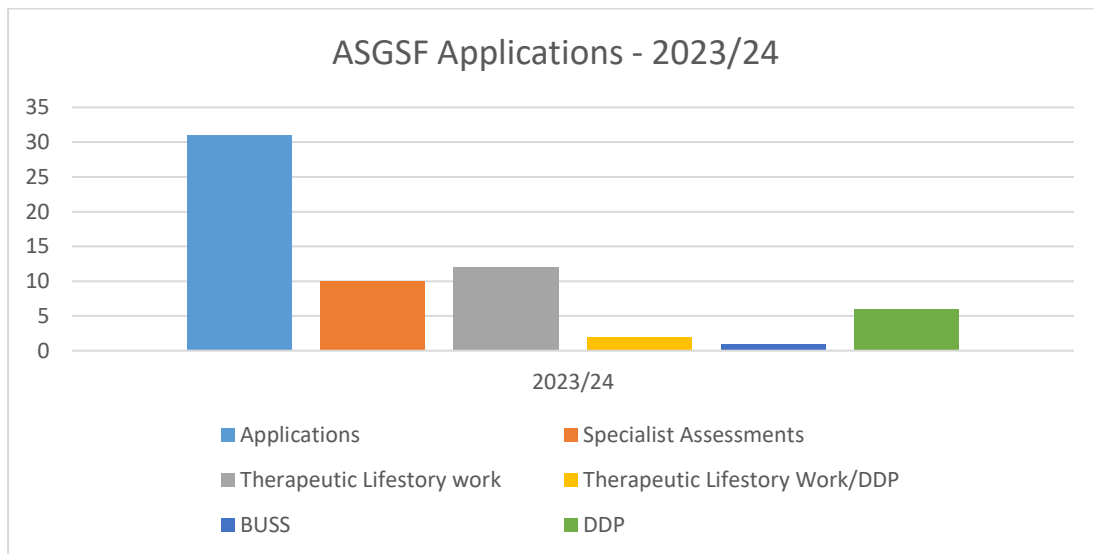
7.3 To respond to this growing area of work, the SGO Support Hub was created and launched; this coincided with Kinship Care Week in October 2023. This service development puts Children's Services in a better position to respond to any requirements outlined in the recently launched Kinship Care Strategy (2023); importantly it has increased capacity in the service to support Special Guardians and other Kinship Arrangements.

7.4 In May 2023, the Directorate Management Team (DMT) agreed to an investment which would bring about an improved offer of financial support to Special Guardians and other Kinship Arrangements. The policy that determines this support has been refreshed and is now operational.

7.5 In 2023/24, 31 applications were made to the Adoption & Special Guardian Support Fund (ASGSF). The ASGSF provides funds to local authorities and regional adoption agencies (RAAs) to pay for essential therapeutic services for eligible adoptive, special guardianship order (SGO) and child arrangement order (CAO) families. Until the end of March 2025, the ASGSF will have 2 fair access limits:

- £2,500 per child per year for specialist assessment
- £5,000 per child per year for therapy.

7.6 The work commissioned via ASGSF is set out in the chart below:



7.7 In addition to the support on offer from the SGO Support Hub, the Fostering Service have recommissioned support from Kinship (Kinship are the leading kinship charity in England & Wales). Walsall have recommissioned the Kinship Connected element of support which is a tried and tested model helping local authorities improve outcomes for special guardians and other kinship carers through intensive one-to-one support and peer support groups. It is designed on an asset-based approach, which views the skills, knowledge and resources available in individuals and communities as a means of finding solutions to the issues people face. The model also supports the concept of social action - building local resilience through peer-to-peer volunteering led by kinship carers. Kinship carers are supported over a 26-week period by a project worker during which both 1:1 and peer support is available.

## **8. Impower & Fosterlink:**

8.1 In 2024, the Fostering Service have worked with two external organisations who have undertaken a deep dive audit and a diagnostic inspection to examine how the Fostering Service recruits, assesses and supports foster carers.

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

- Mockingbird (with a 6th Hub soon to be launched)
- New Horizon Fostering Scheme
- Out of hours support line
- Support is available from a stable workforce that is growing in confidence.

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

8.4 The Fosterlink report noted that:

- Walsall's Fostering Service is a well-established, experienced service.
- Walsall has maintained a stable workforce, with staff and foster carers both loyal and proud to be part of the Fostering Service: this came across strongly during my onsite visits and in meetings with focus groups.
- Walsall was the first local authority in the West Midlands to be part of the Mockingbird extended family model. There are five fully operational Mockingbird constellations in Walsall with a sixth hub launching in 2024.



- Walsall has implemented the New Horizon's Fostering Scheme, which is a specialist fostering scheme aimed at helping children and young people who are currently living in Residential Provision to return to the area and live with foster carers.
- Foster Carers talked positively of their working relationship with the Home Finding Lead and getting regular communication. They felt that careful matching is actively practiced and in a lot of cases spoke about having the opportunity for introductions before a placement is made.
- Walsall Council are a Fostering Friendly Employer (Fostering Network).
- Where accommodation is a barrier to foster carers meeting the needs of children in their care, they have implemented a Capital Grant Scheme to fund adaptations to foster carers' homes so that they can care or continue to care for children.
- Foster Carers talked positively of their working relationship with the Placement Lead and getting regular communication. They felt that careful matching is actively practiced and in a lot of cases spoke about having the opportunity for introductions before a placement is made.
- Foster Carers feel part of a strong fostering community.

8.5 The Fostering Service have examined the findings and learning from these respective reports and are making use of relevant recommendations to improve service delivery.

## **9. Supervision, Support, Training & Development**

9.1 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.

9.2 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.'

9.3 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 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, The Fostering Service had supported **111** foster carers to complete this training, with **54** foster carers completing this in 2023/2024.

- 9.4 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.
- 9.5 The Mockingbird Family Model continues to be popular with Foster Carers. As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, there were **5** live Mockingbird Constellations. The 6<sup>th</sup> Hub was launched during Foster Carer Fortnight in May 2024.
- 9.6 The Fostering Service continue to produce and share regular, separate newsletters with Foster Carers and SGO Carers. In addition to this, all foster carers approved by Walsall Council are provided with membership of the Fostering Network.

## **10. Fostering Service Practice Improvement Annual Report 2023/24**

- 10.1 The Practice Improvement Manager completes an Annual Report on activity undertaken as part of the Fostering Service Practice Improvement Framework which incorporates 4 areas of Practice Quality Assurance within the Fostering Service, these are:
- Case File Audits
  - Fostering Panel Feedback
  - Themed Case File Audits
  - Learning Reviews
- 10.2 These activities help the Fostering Service to pause and reflect on the work we do, acknowledging our achievements but also highlighting the areas where we need to develop our practice. Not only to improve the service we offer to our foster carers but also to achieve our overall goal which is to improve outcomes for children and young people. These activities form part of learning cycle which over time will embedded themselves into our service and become part of our learning culture.
- 10.3 As the full Annual Report for 2023/24 runs to 19 slides, what follows are some key points:
- **49** Case File Audits (CFA) were completed, of which, **15** were themed audits
  - **77%** were rated as 'Good' and **12%** were rated as 'Outstanding'
- 10.4 The Fostering Panel Feedback Loop was introduced in the Fostering Service in March 2022. This involves the Fostering Panel providing Feedback on the quality of reports that are presented to Panel. Panel members are asked to comment on the strengths 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).

- 10.5 Feedback forms are then sent to the workers Team Manager to discuss during supervision. Social workers can also provide some feedback to Panel on their experience at Panel and Foster Carers/Applicants are also able to comment on their experience at fostering panel.
- 10.6 In 2023/24, **61** items requiring feedback were presented to the Fostering Panel. **40%** of these items were Connected Person Assessments and **44%** were Annual Reviews.
- 10.7 **65%** were rated by Panel as 'Outstanding' compared to **30%** the previous year. This is a **35%** rise in paperwork rated as 'Outstanding' showing a large improvement in the quality of work overall. **28%** were rated by Panel as 'Good'.
- 10.8 Themed Audits were completed on:
- Training & Development
  - Panel & ADM
  - Staff Supervision
  - Disruption Meetings
  - The Recruitment & Retention of a small cohort of Foster Carers.
- 10.9 The themes and learning from the range of activity mentioned above are considered at the Practice Improvement Workstream which is led by the Practice Improvement Manager and Senior Practitioners within the Fostering Service. They meet monthly to implement actions from the Quarterly Practice Improvement Reports and support the service in delivering change to practice.

## **11. Marketing & Promotional Activity**

- 11.1 Without attracting additional Foster Carers and retaining existing ones, Walsall will not have a sufficient number of homes for existing Children in our 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.
- 11.2 The Fostering Service have updated the Marketing Plan & Communication Plan for 2023/24 and this is used to inform our targeted marketing activities. The Fostering Service have undertaken the following activities:
- Used paid social media advertising
  - Included Fostering leaflet in all letters for Council Tax Bills
  - Extended the radio campaign (January – December 2024)
  - Fostering Information Mailshot to Walsall residents
  - Refreshed the lamppost banners across Walsall
  - Placed physical advertising boards on local traffic roundabouts
  - Advertising campaign on rear of local buses

- Use of digital advertising in local bus shelters
- Regular posts on social media accounts
- Held monthly online information webinars
- Contributed to the award winning 'Any of Us' film
- Takeover of Inside Walsall during Foster Carer Fortnight

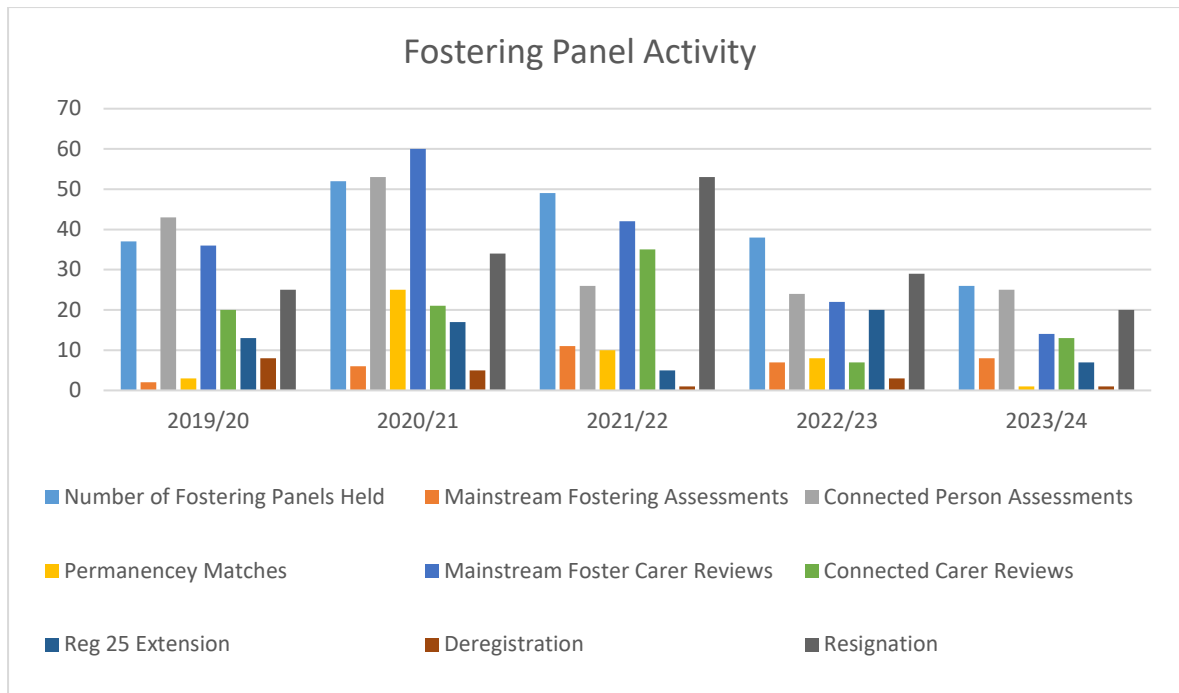
11.3 In addition to the above, as face to face events are an effective way of connecting to the wider community, in 2023/24, the Fostering Service have attended and/or set up an Information stand at the following events/ venues with a view to generating interest and enquiries from prospective foster carers:

- Tesco, Walsall
- Libraries – Aldridge, Bloxwich, Brownhills,
- Pelsall Carnival
- Big Impact Event, Palfrey Park
- Residents R Us Summer Fete
- The Unity Festival
- Bloxwich Lego Club
- Tri It – Pleck Park (Healthy Spaces)
- Kings Hill Park (Healthy Spaces)
- Birchill's Mosque Fun Day
- Walsall Pride
- Walsall Works (Walsall College)
- Manor Hospital (now attending fortnightly)
- Early Years Event - Manor Farm
- Guru Nanak Gurdwara Sahib (two occasions)
- Walsall Art Gallery (three occasions)
- Residents R Us Christmas Fete
- Bloxwich Leisure Centre
- Pelsall Cricket & Sports Club
- Asda (Darlestone)
- Walsall College Hub
- Dunelm store
- The Civic Centre
- Willenhall Chart Community Hub
- Attended/ information stand at Ikea
- Attended/ information stand at Asda, Darlaston (two occasions)
- Attended/ information stand at Walsall Works Expo

## 12. Fostering Panel

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

12.2 Fostering Panel activity continues to be busy with the Panel meeting on **26** occasions. Panel was quorate on each occasion. The table below outlines the range of work discussed at Fostering Panel.



12.3 The Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) is a review process that prospective or existing foster carers can access when they do not agree with the qualifying determination letter sent to them by their Fostering Service Provider Agency Decision Maker (ADM). The review process is conducted by an IRM review panel which is independent of your fostering service provider. A “Qualifying Determination” is a proposed decision made by a fostering service provider that it does not consider someone suitable to foster. A qualifying determination is issued after either a brief or full report has been presented to the fostering service providers Panel. A qualifying determination can also be issued if the fostering service provider proposes to terminate, or change the terms of approval, of an existing fostering carer.

12.4 In 2023/24 **3** prospective foster carers made a referral to the IRM to appeal the decision of Fostering Panel/ ADM. Of the **3** referrals, 2 have not been heard/ concluded and **1** was not upheld.

### 13. Service Priorities and Developments – 2024/25

13.1 As the Annual Report is 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 2024/25, this includes:

- Completed first refresh of the Fostering Website
- Commenced using Impower’s Valuing Care Tool for Foster Carers
- Started to work with the Behavioural Insight Team to improve our promotional material and messaging for the recruitment & retention of foster carers
- Started to explore the use of Digital Marketing to generate more viable enquires from prospective foster carers

- Held a Foster Carer Thank You Event
- Launched 6<sup>th</sup> Mockingbird Hub
- Approved 3<sup>rd</sup> New Horizon Foster Carer
- Recruited a part time Training & Development Officer to improve offer of training for foster carers and workforce
- Recruiting an additional Customer Service Officer to improve capacity to respond to prospective foster carers enquiries and increase promotional activity
- Aiming to launch an Emergency Foster Carer Scheme

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