



ANNUAL FOSTERING REPORT

April 2022 – March 2023

Author: Caterina Robinson – Fostering Service Manager
Children and Young People in Care Service



CITY OF
WOLVERHAMPTON
COUNCIL



#FOSTERINGFORWOLVES

Contents

Section 1 – Introduction

Section 2 - The Fostering Service Structure

- 2.1 Recruitment and Assessment
- 2.2 Fostering Support
- 2.3 Structure Chart
- 2.4 Workforce Development

Section 3 – Service Delivery

- 3.1 Language
- 3.2 Foster Parent Recruitment
- 3.3 Assessments
- 3.4 Fostering Support
- 3.5 Permanency
- 3.6 Connected Persons
- 3.7 Special Guardianship Order
- 3.8 Private Fostering
- 3.9 Short Breaks

Section 4 – Quality Assurance and Improvement

- 4.1 Performance Data
- 4.2 Foster Parent Engagement
- 4.3 Fostering Panel
- 4.4 Complaints / Compliments

Section 5 – Summary

- 5.1 Key Achievements
- 5.2 Progress on Key Objectives 2022/23
- 5.3 Key Objectives 2023/24

Section 1: Introduction

This report provides an annual review of the structure, duties, and performance of the City of Wolverhampton Fostering Service. The National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services (2011) requires that all Fostering Services provide an annual report to their Executive or Trustees. In the case of Local Authorities, the 'executive' is the Elected Members of the City of Wolverhampton.

The Fostering Service is located within the Children and Young People in Care Service of the City of Wolverhampton Council. The Fostering Service recruits, assesses, supports, and develops foster parents to provide a good standard of care and stability to children and young people aged 0-18 years. In addition, the service works with the Supported Accommodation Team to promote Staying Put arrangements for young people to remain living with their foster parents post 18. Currently we have 36 young people in Staying Put arrangements.

The Fostering Service operates within the following legislation:

- Children Act 2004
- Children & Young Persons Act 2008
- Care Standards Act 2000
- Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 2011
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 2011
- The Care Planning, Home, and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 (amended 2021)
- Children (Private Arrangement for Fostering) Regulations 2005.

The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 imposes a duty on Local Authorities to find sufficient fostering provisions in its local area. The Fostering Service is committed to provide stability, care, and security to children in care and ensure that foster parents can meet the individual needs of children. The importance of children remaining within their birth family network, education and within their community remains paramount in securing stability for the child and there is a heavy focus on encouraging fostering applicants to "*foster for your local council*" for this reason.

The Fostering Service was last inspected by Ofsted as part of a single inspection of Children's Services in March 2022 and was rated 'Good'. Overall feedback was positive, as Ofsted found children were living with foster parents who met their needs and stability was a real strength.

The Fostering Service seeks to provide a comprehensive and excellent quality foster care to all children in the care of the City of Wolverhampton. Foster parents provide children in care a positive experience of family life within an environment that promotes their physical, emotional and health needs. Working in partnership with health, education and other allied professionals enables foster parents to provide a warm, safe, and caring family environment ensuring that the children's emotional health and

development is promoted. Foster parents ensure children in care have access to available opportunities to promote children's attendance and their academic achievements, thus maximising all opportunities for children to achieve their full potential.

Section 2: The Fostering Service Structure

The Fostering Service has a full complement of 23 full time equivalent qualified social work posts, one unqualified post, one specific business support posts (covering SGO finances) and one Fostering Panel Advisor. This year the service appointed to a new Service Manager in January 2023, followed by two new Team Managers (one had been seconded into the role previously and the other appointed from the Assessment Team) along with two permanent Senior Social Workers (from within the service either seconded or increasing their hours). Three long term members of the team have taken retirement (Service Manager, Senior Social Worker, and Social Worker).

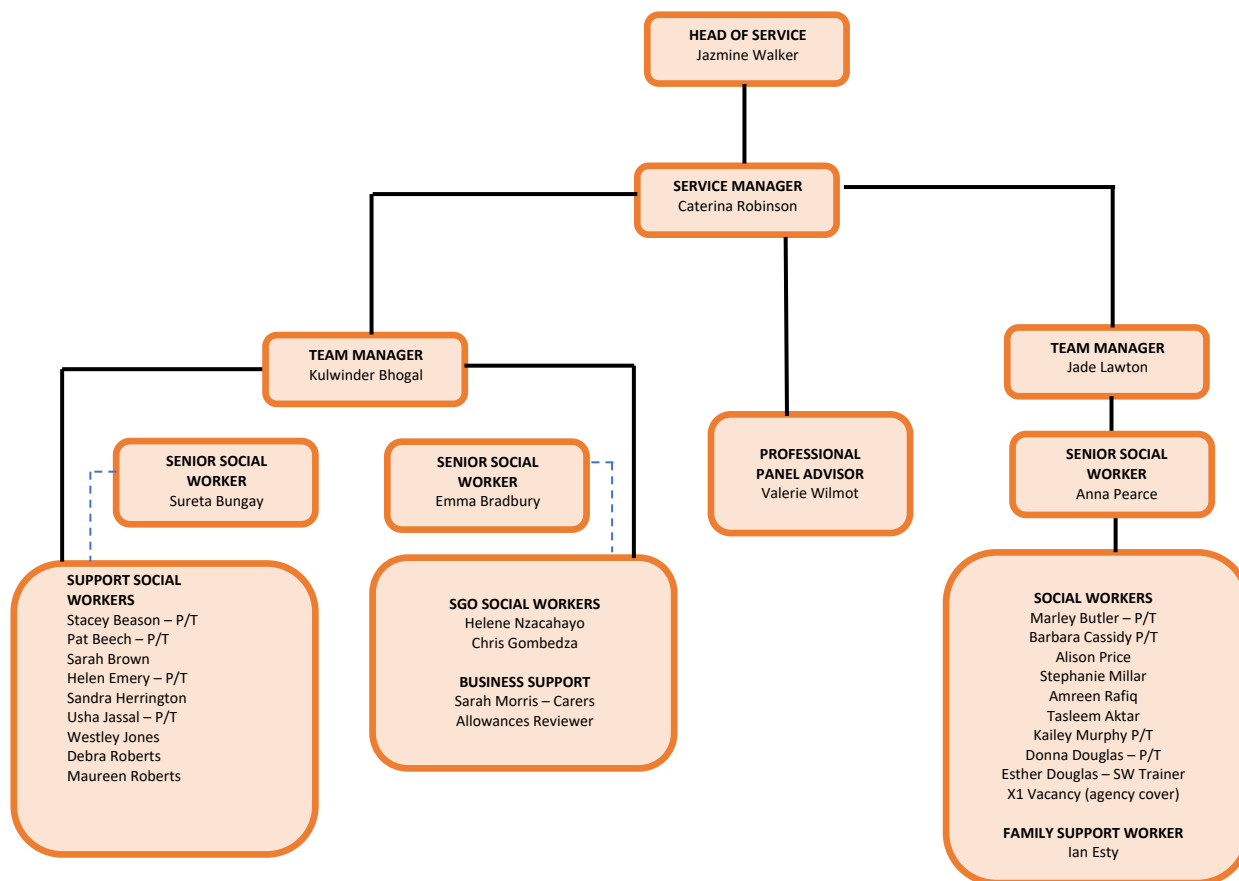
The Fostering Service is divided into two main teams:

2.1 Recruitment and Assessment – The team set out an extensive recruitment strategy each year with support from a fostering marketing executive. Staff attend recruitment events to offer expert advice to potential applicants. The team respond promptly to all fostering enquiries to ensure a smooth journey to fostering from the onset. The team have overall responsibility for completing all fostering assessments (i.e., initial assessments, viability assessments, Form Fs (mainstream fostering applicants), Form Cs (connected person assessments), private fostering and Stepparent adoption assessments and presenting these to panel and (where applicable) to Court. The team are also responsible for training, delivering *Skills to Foster* pre-approval and a comprehensive training programme for foster parents once approved. The team are responsible for supervising and support arrangements via regulation 24/25 where children are living with family members prior to approval at fostering panel.

2.2 Fostering Support – The team are responsible for the support and supervision of all foster parents post approval (mainstream, connected and private fostering). The team ensure all foster homes meet National Minimum Standards and are responsible for ensuring all compliance requirements are met as part of fostering regulations. The team work hard to support foster parents to meet the need of children in their care and support stability for positive outcomes for our young people. The Special Guardianship Order (SGO) function sits within the support team and all SGO reports for children and young people in care are completed, whilst all SGO support plans completed across all teams are reviewed before they are filed in court. The financial part of SGO support plans and all post SGO support is reviewed annually or when there is a significant change in a SGO parents' circumstances.

Each team is managed by a team manager and each team manager is supported by senior social workers who supervise up to four social workers and manage an area of work within the team. There is currently one full-time vacancy within the service and one agency social worker covering.

2.3 Structure Chart



2.4 Workforce Development

There is an extensive Workforce Development Plan in place which includes a wide relevant training and development opportunities for all staff throughout the year. All members of staff have completed three Therapeutic Parenting modules, and many are supported to achieve their Practice Education levels one and two. Additional Coram BAAF training was agreed as part of the workforce plan for all fostering social workers to attend to support assessment of adult relationships. Three members of staff have either attended or applied for Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP) level one. In addition, managers and senior social workers are part of a pathways management programme and the service manager is currently completing Level 5 in Management and Leadership.

Section 3 – Service Delivery

3.1 Language

The Fostering Service have pledged to remove the words “*placement*” and “*foster carer*” and have replaced with home / family and foster parent. All policies and documents have been amended as are all marketing materials to evidence the importance of foster families being a **home** and not a *placement* for children and young people in care. This is a shared pledge for the whole of Children’s Services service championed by the Fostering Service.

3.2 Foster Parent Recruitment

Within the team is a dedicated Marketing Executive for fostering who sits within the Council's Corporate Communications Team.

An annual marketing activity plan ensures that recruitment campaigns are planned and spread throughout the year. As with last year, fostering leads from prospective foster parents have mainly come via google search. The enquiries continue to be received and screened by our specialised customer service officer or the marketing executive. If the initial lead is recommending eligibility to foster, this becomes an enquiry. From this point, the Recruitment and Assessment Team will make contact within five working days to book an Initial Assessment. If the Initial Assessment proves positive, the Full Form 'F' Assessment is completed by an assessing social worker within four-six months. The service aim to complete all assessments in-house however the service also has the option to recruit an assessor via Yoo Recruit should the team capacity require this.

Recruitment and Marketing highlights 2022/2023

The recruitment of mainstream foster parents over the past two years is facing an unprecedented challenge. This is a national issue and was recognised with a targeted marketing campaign at Christmas with an advert by John Lewis. This advert was used by all local authorities at Christmas to promote fostering in each local area.

A calendar of online information events via Microsoft Teams was promoted through a digital marketing campaign, advertising on google, social media and partner websites.

As part of our collaboration work through the West Midlands Regional Fostering Recruitment Forum, we joined together with a total of 34 local authorities to produce a high-quality film 'Childhood'. This was a real asset to our recruitment of new foster parents.



The Fostering for Wolverhampton online presence continues to be strong and the stand-alone website, which was introduced in 2018, has been invaluable during these difficult times with a high increase in activity in the last year. There were 12,698 visits to the websites in the financial year 2021-22 but between April 2022-March 2023 this increased massively to 37,804 which equates to an average of 104 people accessing the fostering website daily. Of these 37,804, the following were recorded -

- 26,180 came to the fostering site directly
- 4,953 came via a display advertisement / recruitment event
- 2,641 via a referral
- 2,540 via a paid search (Google ads)
- 760 via social media
- 625 via a standard Google search (not ads)
- 58 via an email
- 49 via any other method

This said, we had fewer web submissions this year than the previous year which indicates that although a much higher amount of people are directed to the website, this is not equating to the number of leads we receive. Work is being completed to make the website more accessible on mobile phones and content is continually reviewed with new videos, links to the recruitments events and testimonials uploaded frequently.

A new Customer Relations Management (CRM) system has been developed to track and manage all data from fostering leads so that we can monitor these closely and pull reports from source of leads and maintain a database to ensure all leads are responded to promptly.

A decision to refresh the fostering brand, language, imagery, and key messages was made towards the end of March 2022. A new look campaign was created for this year and developed in April when face to face recruitment resumed with the re-opening of the fostering pop-up shop in the Mander Centre. This has been used on three campaigns throughout the year.

Recruitment continues throughout the year but the three main periods of campaign activity throughout the year are during Foster Care Fortnight in May, an autumn campaign in September / October and a new year January campaign.

September's campaign focused on a Coffee and Conversation and the team were at various cafes located around the city (WV Active, Morrisons, Kteas Cakes) with the tag line, "*your fostering journey could start with a conversation*".

We all know that foster parents can portray a realistic and positive view of fostering, we use several foster parent champions who work with the Recruitment and Assessment Team to support the innovative marketing and recruitment campaigns. It is important that we have foster parents at events to offer their experience and advice to potential applicants.

Targeted Facebook advertising is ongoing throughout the year and is refreshed regularly for each campaign. The Fostering for Wolves Facebook page is also regularly updated with news, video case studies, related tv programmes and events and shares national news and information from the Fostering Network. Content is also shared on the council's corporate channels including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.



Despite significant recruitment and marketing activity, conversion to actual leads and subsequent approvals has decreased (see performance data 4.1). That said, we have increased our number of children placed with Wolverhampton foster parents, so where we have not been able to recruit, we have been able to maximise our current resource and support foster parents to either return to fostering from a period of dormancy or support additional children where they may have been approved for one child previously as part of our sufficiency plan.

Following the publication of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England in May 2022, The Fostering Network welcomes £25 million investment for the retention and recruitment of foster parents over the next two years. The Government has also decided to apply an above inflationary increase of 12.43% to child allowances for foster parents which Wolverhampton adopted. This has supported families who have been exacerbated with the cost-of-living crisis and it is hoped that this will help make a difference to children and young people in foster families. In addition, Wolverhampton provided all foster parent households a one-off payment of £650 to support with the cost of living over the Winter months.

3.3 Assessments

Each Form F assessment is completed over an average timescale of six months inclusive of stage one and stage two which run concurrently. Stage one is the lateral checks and information gathering from referees. Stage two is the main assessment.

Assessments are part of the core work of the Recruitment and Assessment Team which enables the building of a comprehensive picture of the applicants. Evidence based, to now include therapeutic parenting tools and analytical assessments are completed on all prospective foster parents to help understand their motivation and ability to care for children who have experienced loss, separation, and trauma. Caring for such children requires foster parents with a degree of resilience and patience in understanding the needs and presenting behaviours of children who have experienced childhood trauma including neglect and abuse. In addition, to collating information the assessment explores the applicant's own experience of childhood, their parenting skills, understanding of safeguarding children and ability to create a warm and nurturing home for children.

A preparation training course at the point of assessment follows the "Skills to Foster" programme, devised by the Fostering Network. Wolverhampton continues to be part of the Black Country Consortium, along with Sandwell, Dudley, and Walsall. The authorities work in partnership offering two places to any of the other local authorities on every course they run. Each of the local authorities delivers the course a varying number of times, with Wolverhampton running the course twelve times yearly. This has doubled from previous years where we ran six as we now offer a connected and mainstream course alternate month.

To develop and enhance the training and development of foster parents there is a full-time training social worker within the Fostering Team. The role is to strengthen the importance of continual development and to ensure that foster parents' training is targeted to meet the needs of children placed. Completed training will be recorded on the foster carer's file and reviewed during supervision and their Personal Development

Plan (PDP). Foster parents are required to complete the evidenced based Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDS) workbook within the first year of approval (first eighteen months connected persons). This is monitored via a new foster parent register.

3.4 Fostering Support

The Support Team has responsibility for providing supervision and support to foster parents and special guardians.

Following approval all foster parents have a supervising social worker who is responsible for supervising and supporting parents, ensuring that they have the necessary guidance, support, challenge, and direction to maintain a quality service, including safe care practices.

As of 31 March, there are 218 fostering households: 62 are connected persons and 156 are mainstream (this includes one short break foster parent), collectively they are providing a home to 274 children and young people in care. Of these, there are seven mainstream fostering households dormant (not currently able to care for a child) due to ill health or home improvements being undertaken. In accordance with the new Dormancy Policy a foster parent may remain dormant for a period of six months at which point their circumstances will be reviewed.

The service focus is home stability, reducing home moves and improving outcomes for children. During 2022-23 over 50 home stability meetings were attended by fostering staff where home moves were averted by providing additional support to parents to minimise further disruption. All our foster parents have direct access to local partners in Health and Education who also provide them with advice and support. Foster parents provide homes for children and young people who present challenges and have a range of complex needs. All foster parents are offered support to meet these challenges. In addition, the Fostering Service provides specific training to foster parents to help them understand and manage the child's presenting needs.

The support package offered to all Wolverhampton's foster parents includes:

- Fostering Handbook contains pertinent information useful to parents and is regularly updated to reflect any changes.
- Foster parent profiles have been completed and filed on both parents' records and on the foster parents' register which supports the Personalised Support Team (who are responsible for identifying homes for children).
- Foster parents' training needs are identified as part of their PDP and reviewed regularly during supervision. The PDP's assist in identifying gaps in foster parents skills and knowledge.
- Approximately 80 different courses are provided to Wolverhampton foster parents each year, these courses are provided by both internal and external providers and include on-line courses.
- Therapeutic Parenting Training courses are held two/three times yearly (one evening course) whilst the Nurturing Programme is held three times per year.

- A focus on Restorative Practice has been incorporated into all training events.
- Approved foster parents who live a distance from Wolverhampton are offered the opportunity to complete their training on-line, via a local training provider; AC Education.
- “Buddy Scheme” in place and all Level three parents provide buddy support to less experienced foster parents. 30 foster parents were trained as buddies with 65 to date paired up with newly approved or less experienced foster parents. All newly approved foster parents receive weekly visits for six weeks following approval at panel.
- Fostering Families United (an enhanced peer support model) is currently being revised to offer support across the entire fostering cohort.
- The Foster Parents Portal allows all parents access to pertinent information regarding training and events and is interactive, supporting the recording of fostering logs and regular updates.
- The Foster Parent Forum meets monthly, all foster parents are invited to attend with an added opportunity to celebrate diversity or key themes that month (*picture below of St Patricks Day*). Fostering service manager attends each forum. These are now managed by the support team supervising social workers and attendance increases month on month with guest speakers and an opportunity to engage and hear the voice of foster parents.



- Special events for foster parents and their families include an Easter Egg Hunt, Summer Picnic in the Park (*below*) and a Christmas party.



Sadly, the Christmas party was cancelled this year due to weather conditions, so the Easter party was a much bigger event (Easter Eggstravaganza).

- Foster Parents' Annual Conference - July 2022



This is always a well-attended event with keynote speaker Sarah Dhillon, Co-author of the A-Z of Therapeutic Parenting (*pictured far left*).

- New E-bulletin was launched in March 2023 and now a monthly feature to share news
- The “Love of Fostering Awards” an annual event where parents were recognised for their commitment to fostering throughout the year (*below, December 2022*).



- Foster Talk offer support to all of Wolverhampton's approved foster parents including legal and expenses advice, insurance cover, a 24-hour legal advice helpline, a 24-hour counselling support helpline, an education support line, a Social Work support helpline and access to discounts and exclusive offers.
- Festivals/Cultural events have been promoted on the parents' portal to ensure all faiths recognised, including Ramadan and Holi.
- A Foster Parents Levels Panel has been set up quarterly where foster parents present their application alongside their supervising social worker to be considered for escalation from Level two to Level three or Level three to Level four. There is appropriate challenge at panels to ensure parents have completed training and are willing to engage in recruitment events and act as buddy's to less experienced parents before a decision can be agreed.

3.5 Long-term Fostering and Matching

The Wolverhampton Fostering Service seeks to achieve permanency for children and young people with a Care Plan of Long-Term Fostering. We encourage foster parents to make a commitment to care for a child or young person until they reach the age of independence. These parents often go on to provide 'Staying Put' arrangements for young people to remain in the household post 18 years.

This year the Fostering Service has secured five long-term homes for children via the Linking and Matching process. This is two more than last year. There is focus this year to progress all those awaiting long-term matching. This year we have further revised the linking and matching policy and one key improvement is that we will celebrate children who are linked and matched to their foster parents. In the new policy, Head of Service will send a formal congratulatory letter and card to celebrate the completion of the process for all those who have been linked and matched, confirming their status. This is to reflect that this is a commemorative event for the child and foster parents and to celebrate the commitment being made to the child by the foster parent/s.

The child's social worker together with the fostering supervising social worker are responsible for progressing permanency for the child within the first year of home where their plan is that of permanency outside the family. There is now a linking and matching tracker with service manager oversight to ensure all plans are progressed without drift or delay.

Matching Panel

Last year, Wolverhampton launched an Internal Matching Panel which provides an opportunity to bring together foster parents who are vacant or returning from dormancy along with children's social workers who are looking for a match for a child.

The Internal Panel consists of a Chair, children's social workers who present the information about a child in a profile (often completed by the child with the social worker), supervising social worker, and foster parents. The child's *All About Me* profile and the foster parent's profile is shared in the meeting, foster parents will then ask any questions in order to make an informed decision.

Preference Tool

To support our foster parents to consider caring for our most vulnerable young people the service created a Preference Tool (launched in July 2022) which explores the foster parents' skills, knowledge, experience and if there are any barriers to them caring for our most vulnerable children and young people.

The Preference Tool explores the following areas:

- What past/presenting behaviours foster parents have experienced with a child/young person
- What the child/young persons expressed need may be
- How worried the foster parent may be managing these needs – expressed using a scale 1-10
- How would the foster parent feel parenting a child with these presenting behaviours?
- Finally, to consider what the support needs are, such as training; Therapeutic training, CSE, county lines etc

The scale helps to identify what support our foster parent requires to meet the needs of our children and young people.

We are currently using this tool with:

- Newly approved within the last year without a child in their care
- Experienced foster parents who have been dormant for a period
- Those whose preference is for a younger child ie. 0-10 years
- Experienced foster parents who struggle to manage teenage complex behaviours
- Foster parents who may be considering resigning from fostering to explore other options of fostering

Between July 2022 and March 2023, we have applied this with 13 foster parents and the outcome has been positive. We have had five foster parents return to fostering, five foster parents were identified who required further training and development and three who are considering offering short breaks. This will further support stability and longer-term matching for our children and young people.

3.6 Connected Persons

Local authorities have a responsibility to consider the child's birth family, or friends (Connected Persons) ability to care for a child throughout their care experience. They are assessed by the service as to their suitability to provide appropriate care in accordance with the Fostering Regulations 2011. All Connected Person's assessments are presented to the Fostering Panel who recommend their approval which is subsequently ratified by the Agency Decision Maker.

In 2022/2023 there were 14 connected persons approved. This amounted to a total of 21 children remaining living within their birth family. The recruitment and Assessment Team have undertaken 129 joint viability assessments this year in total, an increase in 35 from last year. We currently have 11 connected persons in assessment.

3.7 Special Guardianship

The responsibility for the assessment and support of Special Guardianships is that of the Fostering Service. This encourages a more joined up approach between teams with the completion of SGO assessments being a joint activity between a social worker in the Fostering Service and a social worker for the child. If the Care Plan for the child recommends long-term fostering with either mainstream or connected persons as a permanency option, then a Special Guardianship Order should be encouraged where this is deemed to be in the child's best interests, essentially removing the child from the care system, and transferring parental responsibility to the care provider.

There are currently 293 children subject to SGO Orders supported Wolverhampton. Of the 293, 78 live outside of Wolverhampton and will be transferred after three years as per the SGO out of area protocol, where Wolverhampton remain financially responsible but the local area in which they live are responsible for the ongoing support. The SGO team also offer an annual review to the established SGO families and respond to any SGO related queries.

All finances relating to SGO plans are reviewed annually to ensure appropriate funding is in place. A designated business support worker supports the SGO financial review function.

The SGO supports social worker delivers an SGO training module specifically for family connected persons which runs directly after each preparation course. This has been planned to inform the prospective foster parents of their options at the earliest opportunity.

The Senior social worker in the SGO team offers bespoke face to face consultations with prospective SGO parents and birth parents, offering them the opportunity to ask any questions and provide clarity regarding post SGO support and services. This is alongside any offer of independent legal advice to ensure SGO is the right plan for the young person and their family. There is a step-by-step flow chart to assist social workers in completing SGO reports and plans and the opportunity to consult with the SGO team throughout.

The supervising social worker and the child's social worker jointly complete the SGO Report, in partnership with the foster family and young person to ensure a seamless transition from foster care to SGO with the young person's best interest at heart.

A tracking tool has been devised and there is monthly oversight of progress to ensure permanency is achieved in a timely manner.

A total of two SGOs were granted in 2022/23 from children in care. This is low in comparison to previous years, however there are currently 22 in process i.e. awaiting a court date with a further 25 being tracked to begin the SGO process. The target to increase positive permanency for our young people and their families year on year via SGO Orders is well on course and there is additional Head of Service oversight via a monthly permanency panel.

Post SGO support

The SGO support plan is reviewed annually and post-SGO support remains high on the agenda. Special Guardians can access all training that is currently offered to our internal foster parents.

The SGO team promote virtual coffee mornings for all SGO parents and invite guest speakers to talk and discuss issues that are relevant to our SGO families. These are now face to face and attendance increases each month. This year for the first time, the team offered a special event for Kinship week which supported kinship / SGO carers to attend a scrapbooking event in the City Suite.

The SGO team have created an online portal which provides updates, information, guidance and advice and links to community-based resources and additional support for our SGO families. We are in the process of compiling a newsletter to share with our SGO families to include the information available on the portal for those who prefer email updates as opposed to online portal access.

The SGO team complete Needs assessments in partnership with our SGO families to make Adoption Support Fund applications for those eligible. We work alongside

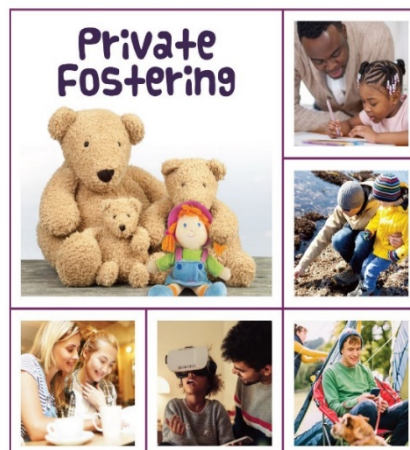
therapists and families to ensure support is reviewed and any ongoing recommendations are progressed.

The SGO team are part of a regional group where we meet with other Local Authorities and Trusts to share best practice ideas and work together to continually improve and promote our support and offers to our SGO families.

3.8 Private Fostering

This is regulated under the Children (Private Arrangement for Fostering) Regulations 2005. The service is responsible for raising awareness with the public, professionals, parents, and children. The assessments, training, and support of Private Foster Parents is the responsibility of the Fostering Service.

There are three Private Fostering Champions within the Fostering Service who regularly attend team meetings across Children's services, and Private Fostering Champions within the teams of our partner agencies and the voluntary sector, with workshops held to further increase awareness and understanding. The Fostering Service supports Private Fostering Week in July each year and refreshes all material/leaflets whilst Private Fostering Champions within the service deliver workshops and attend meetings to increase awareness and understanding. Private Fostering Forums are held quarterly where information is shared, and updates noted with regards to referrals and enquiries. The Annual Private Fostering Report is completed each year and is presented to The Local Safeguarding Children's Board (Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together). An action plan is updated quarterly to ensure this area of practice continues to be reviewed.



This year we have assessed 17 arrangements but only four were approved and progressed as private fostering arrangements. As of March 2023, we currently have four Private Fostering arrangements in assessment.

3.9 Short Breaks

This year we were successful in approving a short break foster parent providing shared care homes for disabled children. The short break parents are usually professionals who work full time but can offer short breaks at weekends. They offer regular breaks to parents and parents who have children who have disabilities so that they can have a break from their caring responsibilities. We continue attempts to enhance this area within the recruitment and communication strategy for 2022/23 and will incorporate expertise from within the Disabled Children and Young People's Service.



Section 4. Quality Assurance and Improvement

4.1 Performance data

The below table highlights the number of leads (initial contacts from applicants) this year compared to previous years. The decrease in numbers is similar for neighbouring local authorities and in line with the national picture.

Year	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
Number of Leads	412	232	117
Initial Assessments	55	39	15
Approved	14	7	7

As the number of leads is lower, we would expect the conversion rate to approval to be lower, but the number of approvals was the same as last year despite a lower number of leads, indicating that the applications were stronger than 2021/22 where seven were approved from the 39 IAs. Although seven were approved this year, ten went through to assessment which is even higher considering 15 IAs were completed. Of the ten who progressed to assessment in 2022/23, two withdrew in assessment stage (due to change in circumstances in their families) and one was no longer suitable hence the seven mainstream carers approved at the end of the year (see below). Often what is found is that the lower the number, the greater the applicant's readiness to become a foster parent and clear motivation as opposed to many leads that do not progress to assessment.

The 2022/23 target was to achieve a net gain of five mainstream and connected foster parents. Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, with 21 approvals (seven mainstream and 14 connected) and 21 de-registrations we achieved an overall of zero foster parents. The below table shows this in comparison to previous years and although not a net gain, this is an improvement on last year and going in the right direction.

Period	Approvals at panel	Number of de-registrations	Net gain
April 2018 -March 2019	23	0	23
April 2019- March 2020	25	3	22
April 2020-March 2021	31	8	23
April 2021-March 2022	22	31	-9
April 2022 – March 2023	21	21	0

The service completed a review of the de-registrations in March 2023 and were satisfied of the reasons for de-registration, mainly due to delayed retirement during COVID and dormancy foster parents.

The following table captures the timeliness of mainstream (Form F) assessments to determine if we are meeting our target of 183 days from initial assessment to approval stage. This is to ensure there is no drift and delay.

Year	Number of Mainstream Approvals	Average Days for Approval	% of Cases Approved in Timeframe
2015/16	21	278	56% (8-month target)
2016/17	22	217	72% (8-month target)
2017/18	20	227	50% (8-month target)
2018/19	24	170	67% (6-month target)
2019/20	25	147	84% (6-month target)
2020/21	14	147	86% (6-month target)
2021/22	7	236	57% (6-month target)
2022/23	7	190	57% (6-month target)

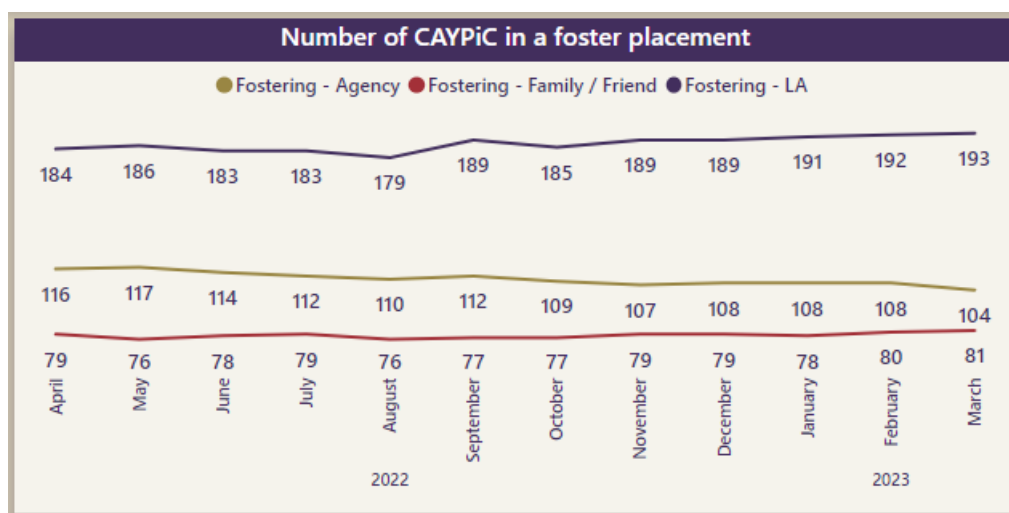
In the year there were seven mainstream foster parents approved at an average timescale of 190 days. This is improved performance on 2021/22 with four approved within timescale. The shortest time taken to be approved was 131 days (50 days shorter than target). The longest time taken was 268 days and this was linked to a medical issue where the delay was between medical agencies which was escalated to service manager.

The need to increase the proportion of foster homes with internal foster parents remains. The table below shows the number of children in each setting at end the end of March 2023. This indicates that although we are not approving as many foster parents, the numbers of children living with our foster parents has increased and decreased for agency foster care. There have been significant improvements over the last six years as set out in the table below and the gap continues to widen between internal and agency foster homes. The dip in connected care since 20/21 was due to 23 securing SGO in this year therefore a positive outcome evidenced by a decrease in numbers.

Type of Home	Number of Children / young people									This year
	13/14	14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	
Connected / Family and Friends	45	50	62	71	78	95	84	102	81	81

Internal Foster homes	158	171	186	193	201	185	195	201	184	193
Independent Fostering Agencies	382	343	268	247	226	198	154	129	119	104

Below shows the figures month by month for 2022/23 so we can see the gradual increase in internal and decrease in external.



At the end of 2022/23, there were 274 children and young people placed internally, with either mainstream or connected parents. This is an increase of nine children from last year. The number of children in IFA homes has reduced by 15 to 104, further evidencing that the gap between internal and external agency homes continues to widen.

Financial Implications

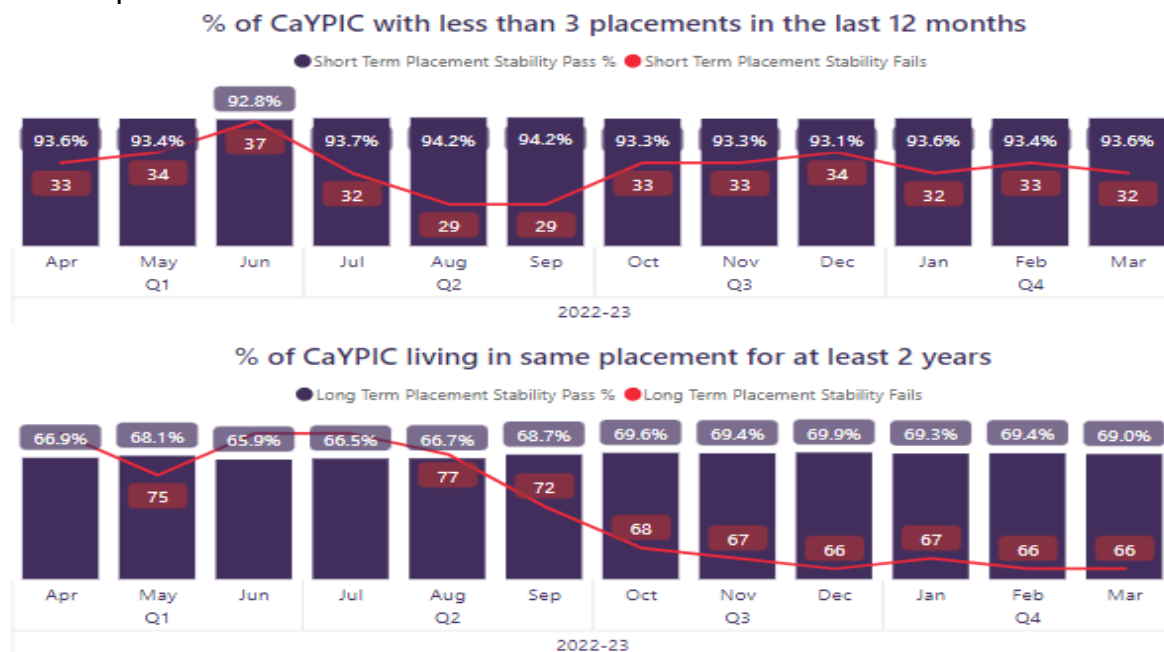
Taking a snapshot of homes at the 31st, March from each year, there has been a year-on-year reduction in the cost for both agency fostering and slight decrease in internal fostering. This could also be linked to the numbers of children in care reducing due to the ongoing work to ensure children secure permanency or return to their birth parents.

Year	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
Independent Fostering Agencies	£8.9m	£7.3m	£6.4m	£6.1m	£5.3m
In-house fostering fees	£4.8m	£4.9m	£5.2m	£4.7m	£4.7m

It should be noted that this saving is calculated purely on home costs and does not incorporate any additional unit cost attributed to placing children internally.

Stability

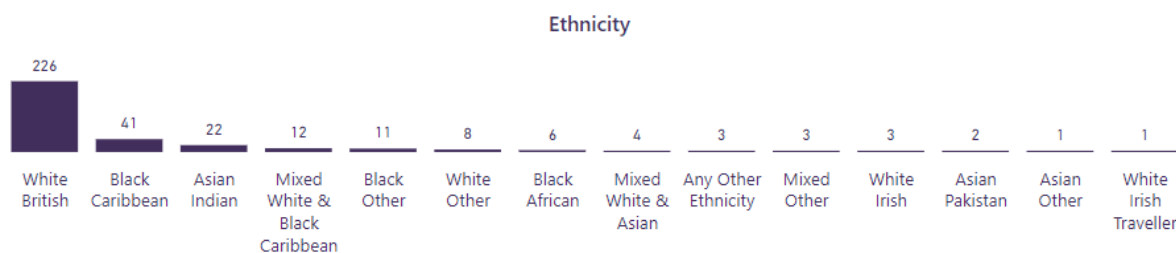
The below evidence that short term stability has remained consistent over the year, however long-term stability has increased by 2.1% compared to the start of the year which is positive.



Stability meetings are crucial to ensure children are not having to move unnecessarily and further support and regular care planning meetings are in place to reduce the number of moves for each young person. This has remained fairly consistent.

Demographics

Below is a breakdown of ethnicity of foster parents as of March 2022. While we have an over representation of children in care from a Black Caribbean and Black Other ethnicity compared to general population of children in the city, most of our foster parents are White British. This is a consideration when supporting fostering parents with meeting the needs of children who are a different ethnicity and/or religion to themselves and there is training and support available in this regard



4.2 Foster Parent Engagement

Foster parents continue to support service delivery and have a voice in how this is achieved. Foster parents' engagement is a key strength as we have foster parents who attend workstream meetings such as developing the Portal, Foster Home Review process and the Family Values Steering Group. We have several foster parents who have expressed an interest in reviewing and developing policies and who wish to be a part of a Foster Parent Association to support with the delivery of events. Foster parents are encouraged to support with delivery of training, recruitment, and events. Foster parents offer peer to peer support.

Foster parents are engaged with service and attend face to face foster parent forms once a month. Engagement rate increased with the service annual survey this year and from this we have been able to develop the portal, the way in which we communicate with foster parents via our new monthly bulletin.

4.3 Wolverhampton Foster Panel

Overview

Wolverhampton's foster panel has a key role to play in the provision and monitoring of foster care for the children and young people of Wolverhampton City.

In February 2023, the Government released a Consultation Document –Stable Families Built on Love. This guide contained proposals for Kinship carers, and wider family's network. These proposals will change the focus of fostering and encourage the assessment and approval of more connected persons. It is recognised that this will challenge the existing emphasis on mainstream applicants and require a shift in thinking and operation for foster panels nationally.

The emphasis will be on a flexible and inclusive approach to connected carer applications and Coram BAAF have gone as far as suggesting that foster panels review their membership and ensure that more proactive arrangements are put into place to challenge existing views and unconscious bias and to ensure that panels are more reflective of the diverse communities they serve and have a greater understanding of the changing needs of society.

In line with these national procedural developments and 'The Children, Young People and Families Plan' for Wolverhampton the City's Foster Panel is striving to develop so that it can meet the demands of a changing community. The priorities for the foster panel are:

- 1) To ensure that children and young people are listened to and involved in all decisions about their lives and that this is evidenced during assessments and panel business
- 2) Foster families receive the support, development, and respect they need to care for children and young people
- 3) That there are enough good quality foster families for children and young people at the time that they are needed
- 4) That foster families are commissioned according to the needs of children
- 5) That children and young people experience stability and homes that support them to achieve the same outcomes as every other child or young person.

Wolverhampton's Foster Panel strives to ensure that the right foster parents are recruited and can respond to the needs of the local community. Further that individuals wanting to foster have the right skills, resilience, and abilities to understand children and to drive forward their needs, views and wishes.

As a team the foster panel members are committed to ensuring that the voice of children and young people remain central to the decision-making process. Foster Panel members have continued to champion the views of children and in the past 12 months, panel membership has been supported by the recruitment of another care experienced young person.

The virtual panel meeting process hosted by Microsoft Teams is a fully embedded vehicle for meetings and the foster panel teams site hosts the business of panel as well as managing and tracking the Agency Decision Makers – ADM - long-term fostering and linking and matching arrangements. In addition, the site is a communication and development hub for panel members. The 'chat' facility ensures a regular line of communication and as every member is issued with their own equipment to ensure that GDPR is adhered to. Security of highly sensitive information is therefore not compromised. Panel business and functioning has continued to be driven by business support.

Panel Central List / Recruitment

The Panel Central list has continued to evolve. The Independent Chair has continued to be supported by a Vice Chair, both of which support the Panel Advisor in the recruitment, development, and appraisals of the wider panel.

Panel Meetings

Panel meetings have continued to be held on a fortnightly basis with the addition of several extra panels being convened over the last twelve months. Panel member commitment to attending meetings remains high and the central list continues to develop and is vibrant and cohesive as a group.

Panel Training and development

Panel training and development is inclusive and panel members have accessed the same training development opportunities following their induction as their Council and Children's Services colleagues. Induction continues to be mandatory and all new panel members must complete Restorative Practice and Unconscious Bias training as well as standard 'new starter' training.

Training outstanding at the time of writing is update in respect of the consultation document 'Stable Homes Built on love'. Refresher – Restorative Practice and Panel updates from Coram BAAF and practice developments across the City's Fostering Service

Panel Achievements

- Panel member retention with several expressions of interest in joining panel
- All annual appraisals – completed within the 12-month period
- Feedback from panel members incorporated into training development
- Development of Regional Black Country Foster Panel network
- Profile of Foster Panel developing across other Black Country Foster Panels
- Foster Panel Coffee and Chat
- Greater communication between senior managers, operational staff and Foster Panel
- Established Quality Assurance and feedback process
- Established practice development forum – bimonthly meeting between independent chair, vice chair, Service Manager and operational managers
- Opportunity to influence operational police and procedures
- Continued development of business processes and tracking arrangements
- Electronic feedback for individuals attending panels
- Greater opportunities to incorporate outcomes from quality assurance

Panel Improvements

- Lack of awareness about the role and function of Foster Panel across the wider Children and Young People's teams.
- Inconsistencies in the quality of work presented to Foster Panel by individual social workers.
- Inconsistencies in the understanding of submission requirements to Panel
- On occasions foster families presented at short notice

All areas of practice deficits are being addressed through Fostering Standards of Practice meetings.

Moving forward Panel Priorities for 2023 - 2024

- Review and increase the diversity of the foster panel membership and in line with this increase its reach to the Young People in Care Services. To actively promote and learn from feedback following Panel attendance and to incorporate the views of care experienced children and young people during panel meetings Further develop and build working together and partnership arrangements with the wider operational service. Further embed a restorative approach and to explore associated training for panel members, and provide opportunities to embrace diversity and the impact of difference
- Continue to work in accordance with 'The Children, Young People and Families Plan' for Wolverhampton.
- Continue to work in accordance with key legislative frameworks and expectations and regulatory requirements
- Maintain working relationships locally and across the Region
- Manage feedback and use outcomes to inform Panel and operational practice moving forward

3.7 Complaints / Compliments

There were two formal complaints received about the Fostering Service during the year 2022-2023. This was slightly lower than the previous year. There was also one informal complaint received.

The complaints received were around decisions to proceed with an extension of the foster parent's home and a conduct of a foster parent. Both complaints have been addressed accordingly at stage two of the complaint procedure. The Fostering Service, upon investigating and reviewing complaints received, continue to ensure that learning is disseminated to staff and colleagues in order that adjustments and improvements can be achieved.

At the same time, there have also been several compliments in relation to the Fostering Service recognising social workers commitment in their job role to families and young people. We receive on average one compliment a month from foster parents and one a week from managers about the support they receive or social work practice. Comments are also collated during fostering panel feedback. These are shared in a monthly newsletter and with senior managers.

Recent examples

Social worker has received a great compliment regarding the support that he has provided to prospective connected foster parents through their assessment process. They commented following Fostering Panel:

"I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders! Thank you for all your help & support too, you've been fab :) "

A second example for support afforded to an approved foster parent

"Thank you for the intense support you have offered A after she had been out of fostering for a long while, she had not had a child in her care for I believe over 5 years, she was anxious, apprehensive and wondering whether she should give up! together you have turned this around and it's excellent!!"

Independent Review Mechanism

This is where a foster parent (including prospective) can appeal if they are unhappy with the outcome of panel. There was one IRM during 2022-23. The IRM concluded in agreement with the assessing social worker, fostering panel and ADM recommendation.

Section 5: Summary

Like the National picture, 2022/23 continued to be characterised by an added pressure of the cost-of-living crisis. While we can evidence marketing and recruitment activity throughout the year, along with positive fostering engagement and events, we

continue to look to ways to improve both practice and service delivery where external challenges remain.

The Fostering Service continues to benefit from experienced managers and the compliment of social workers remains stable. Both teams have made significant progress during the year with many developments made across the service as described and outlined above and the service continues to improve year on year with a key focus on increasing sufficiency in 2023-2024.

5.1 Key Achievements

- An all-new accurate foster parent register was created
- Inclusive language promoted across the whole service
- Embedded therapeutic parenting in supervision, fostering logs and assessments
- Internal matching events and matching policy in place
- Home stability has been steadily maintained and the year ended with more children in internal foster than within external foster care with the gap continuing to widen.
- A permanent Marketing Executive in post with all new Marketing Strategy in place
- Assessment timeliness has improved
- New CRM system in place to track and report on all leads and enquiries
- Full training review was started with a training portal in process
- Short break foster parent recruited specifically for a child with disabilities
- Preference Tool in place to maximise sufficiency within current foster parents
- Linking and Matching is now formally celebrated and recorded on the child's file
- Dormancy Policy in place with those dormant being reviewed and encouraged to return to fostering
- An E-bulletin is sent out monthly with key news and foster parent shout outs

5.2 Progress on Key Objectives set for 2022/23

Objective	Outcome achieved / in progress / not achieved
Achieve a net gain of five foster parents in 2022-23.	This was not achieved due to the large number of de-registrations this year. We were over ambitions with this target as we were required to approve 26 foster parents in order to meet this target.
Parents for Disabled Children and Young People continue to be a focus or recruitment and a support offer is developed and agreed.	We have approved our first short breaks foster parent. This remains a targeted campaign for recruitment to support disabled children and young people
A return to in-person recruitment events blended with virtual opportunities to enable easier access for some.	This has been achieved with a number of face to face and online events throughout last year

<p>Relaunch Foster Families United – September 2022 and ensure the model is encompassed across the cohort of mainstream and connected parents</p>	<p>This is in process with a review of how the model is working since the launch in September 2022</p>
<p>To ensure that the Linking and Matching policy is fully understood, and that practice reflects an increase in arrangements. Celebrate the linking and matching of children and young people with foster parents</p>	<p>Linking and Matching is tracked monthly by the fostering service with the policy launched with all social workers. A celebration is now part of the process.</p>
<p>A fully functioning foster parents register is in place that reflects the approval status of all mainstream foster parents.</p>	<p>This has successfully been achieved and continues to develop in what can be added and reported upon as it evolves but we now have an accurate register with compliance easily accessed</p>
<p>The list of dormant parents reflects a realistic return to fostering or supports parents to make a decision to resign if there is ambivalence regards returning to fostering.</p>	<p>This has been a big area of work which has resulted in a reduction in those dormant for longer than 6 months.</p>
<p>The Ofsted Inspection March/April 2022 highlighted three areas of service improvement – Supervision of fostering staff, foster home reviews and quality of fostering assessments.</p>	<p>All three areas have since improved and have been reported with evidence of the progress and plans in place to sustain this to senior leadership team</p> <p>An assessment workstream and action plan ensured improve assessment quality, including additional Coram BAAF training, and a new standardised assessment to include therapeutic parenting.</p> <p>FHR policy has been updated, as has the FHR report and process. As of March 2023, timeliness of review is 96.7%.</p>

	Regular audits are completed (October 2022 and March 2023) giving assurance that all staff are receiving monthly supervision.
Ongoing support to foster parents to ensure that all consider a 0-18 age range of children and young people and that parents feel confident they can manage the needs of an 0-18 cohort.	Preference tool in place and working well.

5.3 Key Objectives 2023/24

- Key focus on recruiting and supporting foster parents for older age groups
- Develop services for SGO / Kinship care
- Achieve a net gain of five mainstream foster parents and continue to achieve the 183 days target
- All those awaiting link and matching will be progressed
- Review and finalise Foster Families United model
- Relaunch Same Day Family Finding policy and ensure in use and promoted
- Review Fostering Fees and Allowances in line with cost-of-living crisis
- Produce a whole new training offer to foster parents from September 2023 where they can book via the portal, receive reminders, surveys, and certificates
- Develop Short Breaks policy and recruit more short breaks foster parents

