

# Sefton Fostering Service

Annual report

2019–2020



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## Introduction

This report provides an overview of the work of Sefton fostering Service during 2019/20 and highlights the quality of practice, the output of the service and innovations planned to strengthen and enable the service to build on current achievements.

Sefton's Fostering Service is made up of a Team Manager, a Lead Practitioner, 9 Social Workers, 4 Placement Support Workers, 1 Recruitment and Marketing Officer and 1 Training and Development officer. Business support is provided by a team of 5. The service is overseen by a Service Manager who is responsible for the Fostering Service and Corporate Parenting. Children's Services Head of Service is responsible for oversight of the whole service and maintaining standards. The aim of Sefton Fostering Service is to provide a range of high quality, appropriate foster placements that meet the National Minimum Standards (2011), the requirements set out in Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 and ensure the best possible outcomes for Sefton's children who require care.

We want to ensure that every child and young person who cannot live with their birth family grows up as part of a loving family who can meet their needs during their childhood and beyond. We want every child to be heard, happy, healthy and achieve. Our foster carers are there to support children and young people emotionally and physically, to provide them with a safe and secure home where they feel wanted and cared for. We want every child to have a sense of belonging; for them to feel valued and part of their foster family and for them to be supported to maintain good links with their family and significant others if this is considered to be in their interests. We want our carers to be equipped to support children to develop independence skills; for them to achieve and enjoy throughout their childhood and into adulthood.

Sefton Fostering service provides a range of short term and permanent placements with foster carers who have a diverse range of skills and experience. Our foster carers provide respite support to each other, support to birth parents and carers, emergency care, care for children in preparation for adoption and long-term permanence. Many of our young people have chosen to Stay Put with foster carers who have been able to support them beyond 18 through to independence and into adulthood.

We have seen a rise in requests from court to assess family members who have come forward to care for children within care proceedings. This has had a significant impact on our workload however is recognised as vital work as we know that children do best when cared for within their family network if this is assessed as safe and consistent for their welfare. Connected carers are eligible for the same level of services and support as mainstream foster carers.



## Number of fostering households

As of 31st March 2020, Sefton Fostering Service had 89 approved mainstream fostering households caring for 159 children and 62 connected carer households caring for 67 children.

The remainder of our children in care are placed with Independent Fostering Agencies, residential units, residential schools, Staying Put placements, Supported Lodgings or in semi-independent accommodation and children placed for adoption.

## Kinship data 1/4/19 – 31/3/20

### Viability assessments 2019/20

153 requests for Viability

### Panel activity

23 kinship households approved at panel

5 to panel not to approve

2 terminated at panel

### Regulation 24 Connected Carers / Special Guardianship Order (SGO) Child Arrangement Orders (CAO) - children placed

38 households

5 households placements ended (before panel approval)

2 SGO's granted (before panel approval)

2 CAO granted (before panel approval)

In addition, 20 households which began assessment as Connected Carer/SGO carer households in the year.

### Placement sufficiency:

Our aim is always to increase the number of fostering households so that we can offer more choice and ensure children's individual needs are met. We have a specific need for more carers who can support young people over the age of 11 years, larger sibling groups and children with complex needs.

Research both locally and nationally has shown that recruitment of foster carers is a challenge. We have seen an increase in the numbers of children and young people coming into care, creating increased demand for foster carers. We have seen a decline in new approvals this year but have plans in place through our Demand Management strategy to understand our processes better; revitalise our marketing strategy and recruit more foster carers.

In October 2019, a Children's Demand Management Programme was set up to specifically look at recruitment and sufficiency of foster carers with a targeted recruitment plan of achieving 50 new fostering households over the next 3 years. This work is ongoing, and it is recognised that an invest to save approach is required to achieve this ambition. In the last year, we have lost some foster carers and we recognise that retention of existing carers is of equal importance. We need to ensure that our "offer" remains attractive to existing carers and appeals to new applicants.

Despite its rewards, fostering can be a very demanding vocation. Sefton's Fostering Service recognises this and understands good outcomes for children can only be achieved when foster carers feel valued, supported and equipped to provide the attention, commitment and care that children who have experienced trauma, neglect,

harm and loss require. Our foster carers tell us that our training offer is good and we have a committed group of experienced foster carer mentors who are able and willing to support new foster carers. Work is planned with our mentors to increase their role to ensure new carers receive enhanced support at the right time. Consideration is also being given to innovative fostering models; namely the Mockingbird Family Model.

Foster carer feedback has improved over this last year as a consequence of improving our foster carer annual review process. All foster carers are sent a consultation form to complete and return prior to their planned review. Their feedback informs the review and contributes to ongoing service development.

## Foster Carer Survey 2019/2020

### Foster Carer Survey 2019 – Analysis

We had a total of 26 Responses

The preferred way to complete the survey was online with 81% completing online. (Survey was also sent via post as some foster carers do not access email)

People who responded came from 5 areas:

Southport – 6 responses

Formby – 5 responses

Crosby – 1 responses

Litherland – 2 responses

Bootle – 2 Responses

### Foster Carer responses

The majority of people that completed the survey had been fostering between 3 – 10 years i.e placements with caring for children from the local area

#### How did you find out about being a Sefton Council Foster Carer?

The majority of people found out about Sefton Fostering from researching with recommendations from friends coming a close second.

#### What attracted you to be a Sefton Council Foster Carer?

The three main reasons that attracted people to Sefton Fostering was the locality of children i.e. placements from the local area, being able to help children and make a difference to their lives and the training and support on offer. Another reason given was knowing a child that requires fostering (more applicable to connected carers).

### Comments about being a Sefton Council Foster Carer?

*“Since joining Sefton I have been very happy working with a group of lovely people. The training, which is excellent, needs special mention as does the Organisational culture which is co-operative and helpful. Foster carers are valued and seen as part of the team. Information for carers could be improved as stated above.”*

*“Get better at communicating. Especially Locality social workers, talk to Foster Carers about other commitments before arranging contacts and LAC’s etc. People juggling, other foster children, birth children, work commitments. See us as other professionals working with you. To cc on the computer is really simple. Plan long term placement moves and moves to family better, have planning meetings involve everybody.”*

*“As a mentor for new foster carers I feel it is crucial that we are supporting new carers from the very first day. Far too many are giving up on placements before giving it some time. mentoring carers want to go in and help stop the breakdown, but we are not being allocated new carers. What I have learnt over the last 8 years has made me realise how little i knew at the beginning. That is when you need supporting the most.”*

*“It’s very enjoyable, rewarding but also challenging at times”.*

*“Talk to foster carers about other commitments they have before arranging contact session etc also if they have more than one placement need to talk more to the foster carers as to how contact session will be managed”.*

*“Support is key to success of placements, support needs to be from day one of placement”.*

## Placement Support Workers

We have 4 full time Placement Support Workers who play an important role in terms of placement stability and retention. 2 of our PSW’s also support the Marketing and Recruitment officer in following up initial enquiries and undertaking initial home visits.

1 PSW runs a Kids Club on a monthly basis which attracts children who are looked after and children of the foster family. This group offers fun, time out and peer support. PSW’s access Sefton training and can tap into foster carer training.

## Staying Put

Over the last year; 32 young people between 18 and 21 years have remained living with their former foster carers on a “staying put” basis. Their carers continue to have access to Sefton Fostering training offer and receive ongoing financial support. The young people have their own Personal Advisor from our Leaving Care team.

## Foster Carer recruitment

The service has a dedicated part time Marketing and Recruitment Officer who is responsible for recruitment of new mainstream foster carers. This Communications Officer works alongside a Marketing Manager and Communications person based in Strategic support to plan and review marketing activity to recruit more carers. Additional capacity is required to increase recruitment of foster carers.

## Other developments during 2019/2020

- Increased supervisory visits to 6 per year to increase support for carers
- More structured annual review process
- Introduction of foster carer file audits
- Fostering Service Improvement plan.

## Recruitment

### Fostering Enquiries 2019– 2020 Progressions

**Total Approvals – 5**

**Total – Enquiries 320**

Stages	Month	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Pre Stage	Enquiries	8	22	18	13	9	25	16	38	70	61	27	13	320
Stage 1	Registration of Interest	1	8	6	7	2	10	6	6	8	15	3	6	79
	Initial Visit	1	5	4	4	1	6	2	2	1	7	0	3	37
	Open Stage 1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	7
Stage 2	Awaiting Preparation Training	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	5
	Awaiting Assessment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	4
	Assessments	1	2	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	8
	Approvals	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2

### Pre Enquiry – 320 Enquiries

79 Progressed to Registrations of Interest (ROI)

18 On hold - still engaging with

223 Closed \* 181 Withdrew from the process and 42 were discontinued

## ROI

Of the 79 ROI completed 37 Initial Visits (IV) were undertaken and 7 ROI are currently on hold. 35 ROI were closed before an initial visit was undertaken.

(35 ROI closed before Initial Visit) \*See below for closure reasons (Withdrew -24 Terminated as unsuitable - 16)

#### \* Closure Reasons

##### Withdrew

10 – No Further Response

5 - Proceeding with another agency

2 - Medical Issues / Family Illness

2 – Need more time to consider Fostering

2 – Change of circumstance

1 – Withdrew due to the Covid 19

1 - Applying to adopt

1 -Didn't want their ex-partner to be contacted

##### Unsuitable

6 – Medical Issue

3 – Smokes / e cigarette and want to foster Under 5

2 – Safeguarding Concerns

2 – Recent Bereavement

1 – Work / Child Care commitments

1 – Criminal Conviction

1 – Room unsuitable

**Initial Visits completed - 37**

**19– Progressed to Stage 2**

**18 - Closed \*see reasons below**

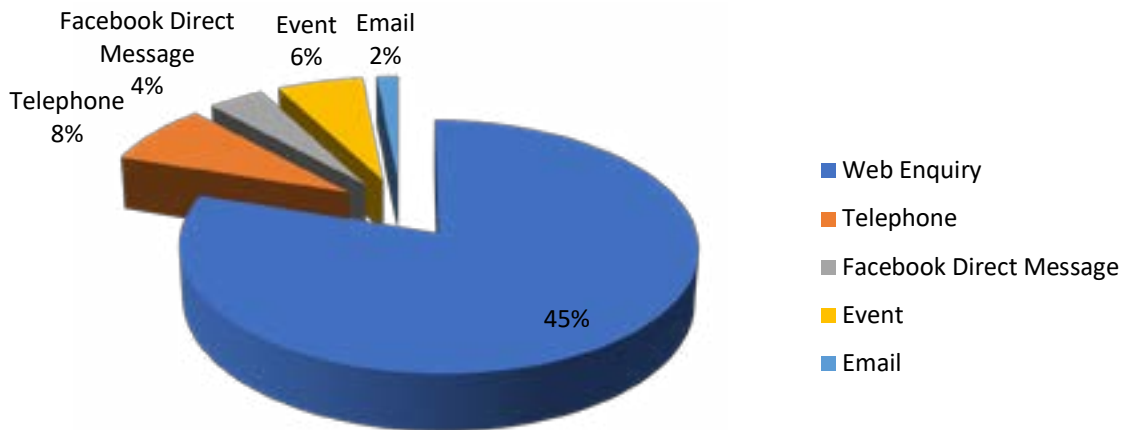
**\*Closure Reasons – Stage 1 - 18**

- 6 – Not ready to proceed further
- 3 – Health Issues
- 2 – Proceeding with another agency
- 2 – Change of circumstance
- 2 – No further Contact
- 1 – Work Commitments
- 1 – Recent Bereavement
- 1 – Decided to put fostering on hold until son is older

Status of Enquires that progressed to Stage 2 – 19

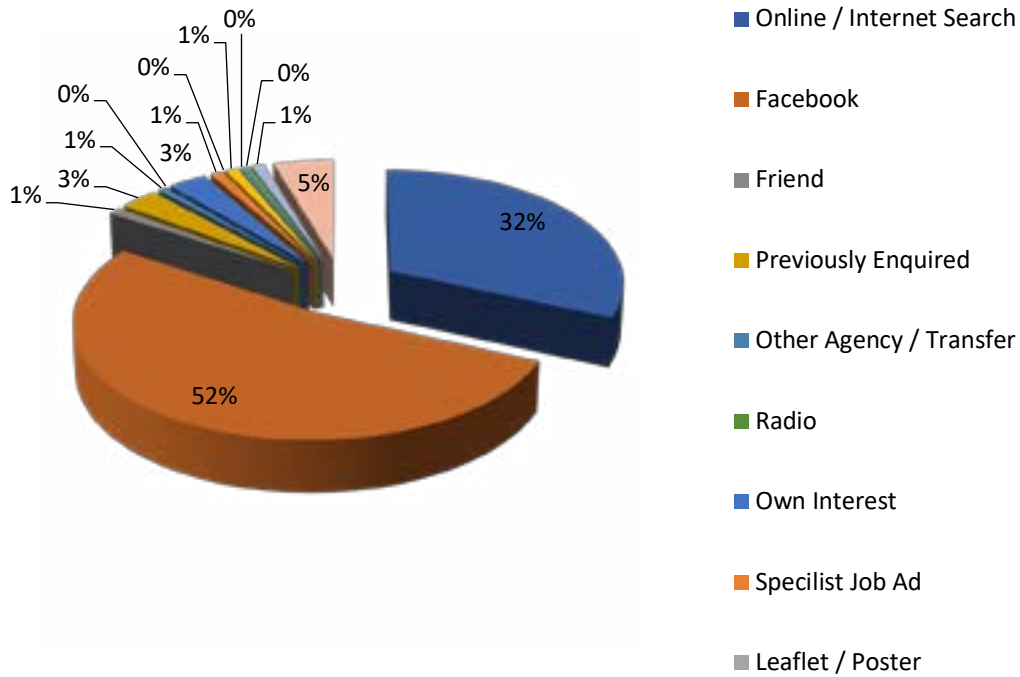
- 2 – Approved to date
- 5 – Assessments Ongoing
- 4 – Awaiting Assessment
- 5 – Awaiting Preparation Groups
- 3 - Open / Ongoing

**Method of Enquiry April 2019 – March 2020**



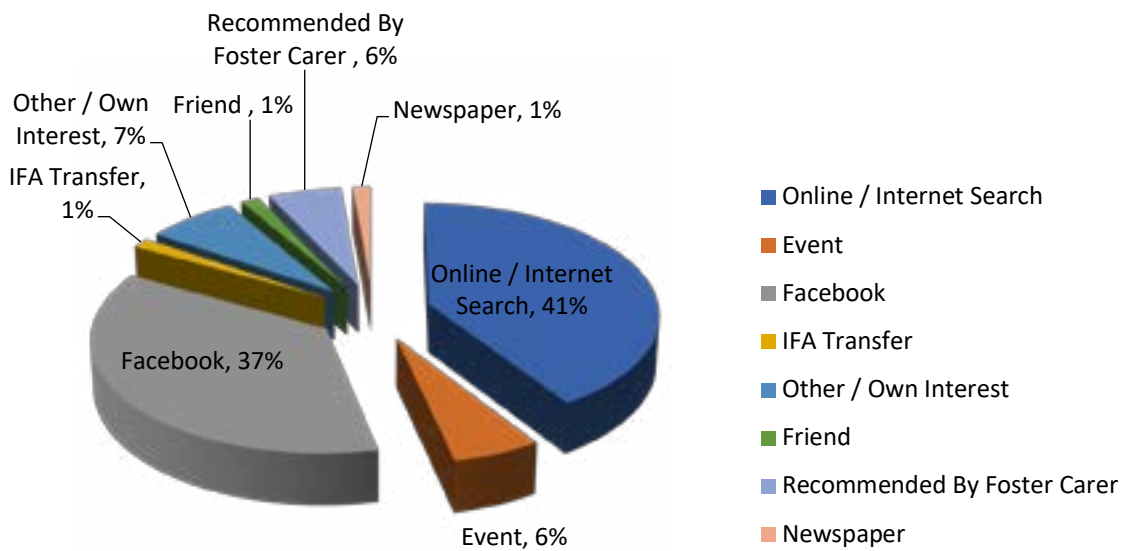


### Source of Enquiry



The two largest sources of enquiry are Facebook with 52% and online / internet searches with 32%.

### Source for enquiries that progress to ROI



The sources of enquiries that progress to ROI largely follow the same pattern as for enquires with the two biggest being online / internet searches with 41% and Facebook with 37%.

Research indicates that people typically take 2 years to contemplate and find out about fostering. We know that the response they receive to their initial contact will influence whether they proceed with the Council when they are ready. (Fostering Network)

We have struggled to recruit carers from diverse backgrounds with the skills to meet the diverse needs of some children; including older children, children from large sibling groups,

parent/child placements as well as for our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. We have improved our training offer to include cultural competence to better equip our foster carers. Targeted recruitment for teenage carers has remained a priority however little specific interest has been achieved. We reviewed our criteria to attract more interest however this has had little impact.

Sefton Council has an ambitious plan to recruit an additional 50 foster carers over the next 3 years; work has begun to consider structure, processes, marketing, recruitment and website developments. The recruitment of foster carers continues to be a challenge in Sefton and nationally, Sefton Fostering are competing with Independent Fostering services and neighbouring local authorities.

We make every effort to place children in their own communities; when this is not possible due to lack of availability or due to the child's needs requiring specialist support, Sefton commissions placements through external independent fostering agencies (IFA) or independent residential placements. All IFA's are approved and monitored through Turning the Taps panel, which is chaired by Sefton's Head of Children's Service (HOS). These placements tend to be more expensive than placing children in the care of our own foster carers. Every effort is made to keep the use of these placements to a minimum and we try to return children/young people to our own in house foster carers; or their families as soon as possible. However, if there are ongoing care proceedings the local authority is often directed by the court to leave children/young people in their placements until the conclusion of the proceedings to provide consistency.

The number of children who are looked after has risen over this last year. Recruitment of new mainstream foster carers remains a high priority for the service to ensure we maximise placement capacity and sufficiency in house and meet Sefton Children's needs within their own communities.

Sefton Fostering Service aims to recruit 50 new foster care households over the next three years. The structure of the fostering service is being considered alongside marketing, recruitment and website development in order to achieve this. Digital marketing services are being used which are known to attract greater attention and we are looking at ways to improve our response to initial enquiries and the Applicants fostering journey. Whilst recognising the importance of face to face interaction with applicants, we want to develop the use of 'online chats' which can be more easily accessible to those considering fostering.

We now also keep in touch with previous applicants who have made a fostering enquiry and withdrew. We send updated fostering information by letter or e-mail to keep potential applicants informed; an e-mail is sent out to all open enquirers informing them of monthly information events. We recognise that fostering impacts on the whole family; that fostering is a big commitment and we want to be available to support interested people whenever the time is right for them.

We are continually reviewing what is working well and looking at ways we can improve. Demand management meetings have focused our attention and will allow us to scrutinise our systems and processes in more detail. The Marketing, recruitment and website subgroup will consider fostering images, branding and advertising and the ongoing development of our website to make it more interactive. The impact of the use of social media, which includes digital campaigns will be monitored more systematically and we will continue to use social media to advertise support information evenings and show regard to our existing foster carers. Bespoke marketing and advertising campaigns have been used to attract carers for a child who was being cared for in a residential unit.

## Early permanence

Stability and early consideration of permanence is key to all children. Careful matching at the earliest opportunity with permanent carers to reduce disruption, uncertainty and instability is key. More placement choice is required in order to consider this for every child and young person. We recognise that more effective links are required with other parts of children's services to ensure that children's needs, wishes and feelings are sought and understood and that permanent foster carers are identified earlier. Once it has been identified that permanency is required, a more robust and targeted approach to family finding is required. Sefton plan this year to train social workers in family group conferencing techniques. This will enable early consideration of a child and families support network; bringing together family and family friends when things are difficult.

## Annual Foster Carer Reviews

A part time Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) was appointed in March 2019 to chair annual foster carer reviews; bringing independence and scrutiny of the Fostering Service and consistency of practice. The FIRO is based in the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit alongside other Independent Reviewing Officers for children who are looked after.

A new annual review administration process has been set up and is now established and functioning more effectively and consistently across the service. Reviews are planned in advance to allow for wide consultation, completion of review documentation and quality assurance by Fostering Managers. Reviews have generally been taking place at the foster carers home with the Supervising Social Worker present.

In January 2020, a foster carer annual review video was created which involved 2 foster carers, FIRO, Supervising Social Worker, Training and Recruitment Officer and Fostering panel members. This will be used to inform safeguarding training and will be uploaded to the Sefton Fostering Website when the new annual review template is ready to be launched; alongside examples of review consultation forms. The aim is to make this process as transparent as possible so that carers and others know what is expected.

It is essential that feedback from children and young people and their social workers informs foster carers annual reviews. This has been a challenge to receive and different techniques are being considered to increase response rates. Feedback is also requested from the child's IRO, education and any other relevant service. We have made good progress in respect of annual reviews this year but will continue to strive for increased engagement and consistent quality.

Learning from foster carer annual reviews has continued throughout the year with feedback sessions being provided to the team by the FIRO who has also met with our foster carer support groups and mentor group. Areas for improvement have been addressed within our Fostering Service Improvement plan.

The new annual review process was implemented on 31.07.2019. As of 31.03.20, 35 reviews had been completed. We are reviewing the timeliness of reviews.

## Comments received from some of our foster carers to inform their annual foster carer review.

*“Always good at dealing with queries. Returns calls and texts even if she doesn't have the answers straight away. She is really friendly and professional too.” SSW*

*“Does what she says” SSW*

*“Absolutely superb, I cannot speak highly enough of her; available at all stages of my fostering process” SSW*

*“Explains the requirements of a foster carer”*

*“Invaluable; he helped with transport to allow us to spend time with our children” PSW*

*“Informative and friendly” SSW*

*“My SSW reminds me of fostering standards” SSW*

*“First aid trainer was amazing... grateful for information to help us look after babies”*

*“Attachment training was excellent”*

*“Spent time getting to know X and he spoke positively about her”*

*“When SSW was off sick we could contact other staff”*

*“Good”*

## Foster Carer File audits

Sefton Fostering Service is committed to improving practice and in doing so ensuring that foster carers receive the right support to care for some of our most vulnerable children. This year we have introduced auditing of our foster carer files to consider compliance and quality. Foster Carer case file audits will be planned at intervals throughout the year. The outcome of these audits will inform team development sessions, training requests, further auditing activity and our improvement plan. Good practice will be celebrated and any gaps will be addressed.

## Retention

Retention of existing foster carers continues to be a high priority for the fostering service. We know how important support and training is to retention of carers. For those who choose to leave the service we need to better understand their reasons why and to this end we are considering how best to complete exit interviews.

## Training

We have a full time Training and Development Officer who is responsible for coordinating, developing and delivering a programme of training days, workshops and e-learning which is responsive to the diverse requirements of the Fostering Service; to include the needs of members of our Fostering Panel. The training programme includes “pre-approval” training, i.e. Skills to Foster, mandatory training for all foster carers and workshops. Also, training sessions aimed specifically at supporting our connected carers. Sessions take place during the daytime and at evenings and weekends to take into account carers other work commitments. Venues are used across the borough to ensure training is accessible to all. Our Training and Development Officer also offers support sessions to our carers to help them think about their TDS workbooks.

Training attendance in 2019-2020 by foster carers was 491 (76 training events) and 15 carers were supported in completing their portfolio

## Comments from foster carers attending training events

### Understanding Autism

*“Activities were brilliant, make you understand the difficulties and how their brain ticks.”*

### Moving on

*“I really liked the interactive approach. Great to hear from other carers experiences. Will use ideas when next I support a child to move on.”*

### Equality and Diversity

*“I feel I have more of an understanding and feel more confident to discuss trans issues and challenge discrimination. “*

*“Feel better equipped to support the children who come through my door.”*

### Promoting sleep

*“The whole course was very informative, especially the quiz & understanding how sleep works.*

*“It reinforced ideas about how to gradually encourage self-soothing.”*

### Contact

*“We needed to know at the start of fostering what is on this course because you could stand up for yourself and the children more.”*

*“It is good to have time to think about contact, working with the parents and understand what they might get from the time with their children.”*

*“When you know your role you can be creative. Flexibility is key to an ongoing positive relationship.”*

*“As a new carer I feel less worried and more hopeful about contact in the future.”*

A key area of development within the fostering service has been identified around the provision of specialist placements in particular for those children who can come back into a foster family following a period of time within a residential unit and those children and young people who are remanded or who come into local authority care at short notice. In order to address this, we need to look at the training required within Sefton and identify, not only within our existing cohort of carers but also from new applicants, those who could be approved as specialist carers for these young people.

The Fostering Service holds an Annual Conference for all Foster Carers to attend which includes professional speakers. This years conference was a huge success; our key speaker spoke with great energy and empathy about her experience of fostering and social work; about the importance of attachment and compassion fatigue. Others speakers talked about personal experiences of being in foster care, the new annual review process and cultural considerations. Foster carer mentors also spoke about their role and support available for new and existing carers and afternoon workshops allowed for group discussions. This event is used to network and demonstrate to Foster Carers that they are valued in their role. Feedback from carers and others was exclusively positive.

A foster carer handbook is being considered; a hard copy will be sent to all our Foster Carers. The handbook will contain pertinent information useful for carers and will be regularly updated to reflect any changes within the service. The handbook will be on our website. and will be updated accordingly. Any feedback from carers will be taken on board.

## Fostering Panel

It continues to be a busy period for the Fostering Panel, with a steady flow of Foster Carer approvals, resignations, deregistration of foster carers and annual foster carer reviews. There has been a steady increase in the number of placements made with Family and Friends Foster Carers as in the previous year. Foster Carer’s first annual reviews have been presented to panel, as have reviews requiring change of approval category, and reviews following concerns and guidance relevant to Fostering.

<b>Panel Business</b>	<b>Number</b>
Mainstream Assessment Foster Carers - Approved	5
Mainstream Fostering Assessments - Deferred by panel	2
Mainstream Fostering Assessments - Not Approved	0
Connected Person Fostering Assessments - Approved	22
Connected Person Fostering Assessments - Deferred by Panel	7
Connected Person Foster Carers – Not Approved	4
Request for extension of Regulation 24 - Connected Person/Special Guardian assessments	15
Deregistration of Mainstream Foster Carers	8
Deregistration of Connected Person Foster Carers	19
Foster Carer 1st Annual Reviews considered by panel	15
Foster Carer Reviews (not 1st) considered by panel	2
Foster Carer Reviews deferred by panel for additional information	2
Other reports to panel	0

## Connected Persons Carers (Friends & Family)

The Service is responsible for the assessment, training, and support of Connected Persons Carers and Special Guardianship carers. Connected Persons Assessments are presented to the Fostering Panel make a recommendation in respect of approval which is subsequently ratified by the Agency Decision Maker.

Family and Friends Foster Carers put themselves forward to care for children who are connected to them by association or relationship. They are assessed by the Service as to their suitability to provide appropriate care in accordance with the Fostering Regulations 2011. From April 2019 – March 2020 there were 22 Family and Friends Carers approved.

Schedule 4 of Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (England) 2010 Assessments whereby Family and Friends Foster Carers are granted temporary approval require allocation of a Social Worker to supervise and assess the placement suitability within a sixteen-week timescale. An extension of eight weeks continues to be applied where required and a clear process is being followed via Fostering Panel and Head of Service to reduce the number of unregulated placements. Delay is caused by delays in receipt of checks and references, rather than assessment completion.

All approved Foster Carers are allocated a qualified Supervising Social Worker. Following approval, the Supervising Social Workers are responsible for supervising and supporting carers, ensuring that they have the necessary guidance, support, challenge and direction to maintain a quality service, including safe care practices. This includes a foster carer agreement that they must work within the agency's policies, procedures and guidance. Our foster carer agreement has been adapted to take into account changes to training expectations and the frequency of supervisory visits.

Sefton has a commissioning arrangement with Foster talk who offer support to all of Sefton's approved Foster Carers including; legal advice and expenses, 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.

We hope to be able to commission services from Grandparents Plus/ Kinship Connect to further support our connected carers in the future.

## Special Guardianship

The responsibility for the assessment and support of Special Guardianship Orders is that of the Fostering Service. This encourages a more joined up approach between teams with the completion of assessment being a joint activity between the Social Worker in Fostering and the Social Worker for the child. If the Care Plan for the child recommends Long Term Fostering with either mainstream or Family and Friends as a permanency option a Special Guardianship Order should be considered 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 carer. A tracking tool has been devised and there is monthly oversight of progress to ensure permanency is achieved via SGO in a timely manner. 15 SGO were granted through the period 2019/20.

To support placement stability, we need to ensure disruption meetings are taking place consistently. Placement stability meetings will be chaired by the children's team managers. This area needs development to ensure that practice is consistently supporting children and foster carers. Any placement difficulties need to be identified at an earlier stage following supervisory visits. This will continue to be a key area of focus next year as we work towards improving placement stability for our children.

## Resignations

Historically, we have not as a Service been as pro-active as we could be in understanding why foster carers choose to resign. Moving forward, it is our intention to offer foster carers an exit interview with an independent person in order to better understand their reasons and rationale for their decision. A process is being considered to facilitate exit interviews in the near future.

## Allegations

In some circumstances, allegations about a foster carer are made and these are discussed with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO).

Narrative	Number
The number of allegations against foster carers made by fostered children	4
The number of allegations against foster carers made by other sources	3
The number of children who have made allegations against their foster carers	4
The number of foster carers who have been subject to allegations	7
<b>Physical abuse</b>	4
<b>Sexual abuse</b>	0
<b>Neglect</b>	1
<b>Emotional abuse</b>	2

**2 concerns resolved no further action and 5 with a recommendation to return to panel for an early review.**

## Complaints

In the last year, the Fostering Service has received one complaint which was in relation to a kinship foster carer who was caring for her grandchildren. The carer was unhappy with the service she was receiving and the delay in her assessment. This was investigated through Sefton's complaints service and the carers complaint was upheld and a letter of apology was sent to the carer.

### Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)

If carers or prospective carers are unhappy about recommendations made by the fostering panel and decisions made by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) they can appeal the decision through two mechanisms. One is a request for another Fostering Panel to hear issues again and another is for the case to be referred to the IRM. In this financial year Sefton have had one case referred to the IRM Panel who unanimously recommended the couple were suitable to be approved as connected persons foster carers. The final decision by the ADM was to uphold the decision of Sefton's fostering panel not approve the applicants.

### Compliments

The Fostering Service welcomes compliments and suggestions and has received many compliments about social workers in the fostering service and compliments about the placement support workers who have completed a wide range of activities and events for children looked after. We also welcome any suggestions that can improve the service we provide.

## Progress made during 2019/2020

### Key priorities were:

- Specialist teen scheme – This was launched in 2018 however we have not been able to attract or recruit specific carers. We are considering our marketing and recruitment strategies as part of wider demand management.
- Increase numbers of children leaving care through permanency routes e.g. SGO – this work is ongoing.
- Placement stability and retention of new carers – we are continually reviewing support available to new carers; support provided by our foster carer mentors and training available.
- Reduce number of children placed in external placements – over this last year we have managed to return one child to foster care.

## The Fostering Service looking head 2020/2021

In a televised announcement on 23 March, Boris Johnson said: “From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction - you must stay at home.” We envisage new challenges this year as a consequence of the Coronavirus Pandemic. We will continue to support our carers; take heed of government guidance and innovate where necessary.

- We will continue to work with our foster carers and mentors to ensure participation in practice and that their views shape service improvements and delivery.
- Placement choice and sufficiency will remain a challenge. A whole service approach is being considered as part of Children’s Service Demand Management strategy. We will be considering the structure of the Fostering Services and processes to ensure that all staff are best utilised to meet the needs of our existing carers, children in their care and meet growing demand.
- Work with our partners in marketing and communications to consider our recruitment and marketing strategy; to increase choice of appropriate placements. Undertake targeted recruitment campaigns to increase the number of foster placements for all ages of children.
- Improve Sefton Fostering website; make payment levels and assessment timescales more transparent, annual review process clearer.
- Set up an exit interview process to ensure that learning is captured from those carers who leave the service.
- Ensure that a foster carer handbook is available for our carers by the Summer 2020.
- Further improve our foster carer annual review process by refreshing the annual review form; encouraging greater feedback from children and their social workers and by improving timeliness and ensuring consistent quality.
- Learn from foster carer file audits and feedback from annual foster carer reviews; ensure robust management oversight and supervision to close learning loops.
- Commit to team development sessions; ensuring we get the basics right every time; increasing our skills and knowledge accordingly.
- Improve quality and timeliness of assessments and quality assurance of information presented to Fostering Panel.
- Improve communication with Fostering Panel; by setting up quarterly meetings.
- Update policies and procedures to support the Fostering Service and our foster carers.
- Strengthen support available to connected carers via commissioning services to assist them – Grandparents Plus/Kinship Connect
- Ongoing consideration of innovative models of working; namely Mockingbird Family Model.
- In previous reports, it was acknowledged that fostering performance data was lacking. this remains an area of development and requires further work this year to improve data collection and management grip.



- The Fostering Service intends to improve performance in permanence planning by ensuring that more young people are matched at the earliest opportunity with permanent carers to ensure that the time children and young people wait to be permanently matched is reduced.
- Recognition and identification of placement difficulties which are likely to cause placement breakdown requires focus to ensure that those children who are experiencing two or more placement moves are being monitored and that issues around placement support are being addressed at the earliest stage.
- More effective links with other parts of children's services so children who require a permanent foster carer are identified earlier and once these children are identified a more robust and targeted approach to family finding is further embedded.
- These improvements remain the same as in 2018/2019 so it is recognised that there is a need to introduce A more robust management tracking system for timescales of friends and family assessments as well as ongoing work with Practitioners and Managers to ensure all assessments are high quality.
- Ongoing work to ensure good communication with Fostering Panel.

**Maria Spatuzzi**  
Fostering Manager



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2019-2020