

Sefton Fostering Service

Annual report

2020–2021



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Acknowledgements

With thanks to our Foster Carers who have cared for and supported our children and young people throughout what has been an extraordinary year due to the Corona virus pandemic. In many cases, foster carers support has extended to children and young people's families and their significant others. Our Foster Carers have also supported each other practically and emotionally throughout this period and our foster carer mentors have reached out even further to try and ensure new and existing foster carers have not felt isolated. We are grateful to have so many dedicated foster carer ambassadors who have continued to attend virtual fostering information events to support recruitment and participated in videos to support campaigns and awareness raising.

Our Fostering Panel Chair, Panel members and Panel Administrator adapted quickly to set up virtual foster panel meetings to reduce drift and delay for children, young people and carers. The Make a Difference (MAD) group have continued to support service development ensuring the voices of care experienced young people influence decision making. Oversight, from Sefton Corporate Parenting Board has ensured that we always try to do the best we can for our children and foster carers. Support from Sefton Council Marketing colleagues, Graphics, Communications, Systems, Strategic Support, Finance and Commissioning has also been invaluable.

Finally, to anyone reading this report who is considering fostering with Sefton; we understand that fostering is an important life decision; choosing the right time for you/your family is key and we will be here to answer any queries along the way – when you are ready. Our aim is to support our foster carers well so that they are equipped to give children and young people the best chance of flourishing; ensuring they are happy, heard, healthy and achieving in line with Sefton Council Children & Young People plan 2020 – 2025.

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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of work undertaken by the Fostering Service between April 2020 – April 2021 ; specifically foster carer recruitment, retention and service delivery.

A key priority for Sefton Council is to ensure that children and young people can grow up within their own family safely or within their wider extended family network. Where this is not possible, the Fostering Service contributes to achieving improved outcomes for children and young people.

Sefton Fostering Service aim is to increase placement sufficiency and choice so that when alternative care is required; children can be fostered within their own communities by committed and caring foster carers who are able to meet their needs. Early consideration of family members at the outset and during care proceedings is required to ensure good contingency planning for children. We have seen an 8 % increase in the number of children coming into care over this last year influenced by an increase in stress upon families during the pandemic and a reduction in the number of children leaving care and delays in Adoption. Fostering has become increasingly complex and has required our experienced and new foster carers to adapt to changing situations rapidly to ensure their own safety, wellbeing and that of any children they have been caring for. There have been additional challenges linked to children spending time with their parents/ families because of the pandemic. The borough of Sefton has been in tier 3 lockdown on 3 separate occasions which has placed strain on families, carers and services.

Retention has remained a priority alongside recruitment of mainstream foster carers. We will continue to require a diverse range of foster carers who are flexible, dedicated and committed to meeting the needs of our children and young people. Their commitment to ongoing training will remain important as will the invaluable support that many offer each other and is provided by Sefton Fostering, Children's Services, Virtual school, health and other partners.

Sefton Fostering Service

Up until December 2020, the Fostering Service was made up of one Fostering team which comprised of – 1 Team Manager, 1 Lead Practitioner, 6 Supervising Social Workers and 4 Assessing Social Workers. Assessing Social Workers are responsible for viability, mainstream and connected carer (friends/family) assessments. Supervising Social Workers are responsible for support, supervision, annual foster carer reviews, updated assessments and responding to any allegations. The service also has the benefit of a Training and Development Officer and a part time Recruitment and Marketing Officer; 4 experienced Placement Support Workers and a business support team to include a Panel Administrator. Corporate Parenting Service Manager was responsible for the Fostering Service up until September 2020 when an Interim Service Manager for fostering was appointed to provide more focus.

Considerable work has taken place with support from Communications, Marketing and Strategic Support to better understand our structure, processes, strengths and areas for development. This work informed a business case for additional posts to increase capacity across the service. In December 2020, the service was divided into 2 teams – Recruitment & Assessment and Supervision, Support & Review. An additional Team Manager post was created to support this change and additional social worker posts have been created and recruited to. In addition, agreement for a temporary 12-month full time Panel Advisor and 12-month full time Recruitment and Marketing Officer was agreed. It is hoped that we will recruit to these posts by May 2021. Both posts are welcomed; to refresh our marketing approach and timeliness of response to new enquiries. Also, providing additional oversight to quality assure assessments and reviews being presented to Fostering Panel; reducing the number of those deferred.

Whilst our structure has changed, our philosophy and vision remain the same. 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 need foster carers who can work with families to support children's return to their care when this is considered in their interests; also, to be able to sensitively support transitions to adoption when this is the chosen permanence plan. 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 those important to them. We want our foster carers to feel valued and equipped to support children to develop independence skills early on; for our foster carers to be strong advocates for our children – to have high ambitions for them.

Sefton Fostering Service provides a range of short term and longer-term permanent placements with foster carers who have a diverse range of skills and experience. Some of our foster carers can provide emergency care and respite care. Others are able to support young people beyond 18 via “staying put” – many have retained close links into adult years. The Staying Put strategy recognises the importance of life long relationships; staying in contact with former foster carers and their families who have known them as young people.

During the pandemic, 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. We are committed to improving our offer to Connected Carers as we know that their care can ensure that more children and young people grow up in long-lasting and loving homes which can help them to maintain close links with their parents, friends within their own communities. We hear that educationally children in kinship placements do well with 37% achieving the national target of at least five grades of A*-C at GCSE and 16% attending university in one study of young people who had lived in kinship care, in comparison to 6% for children in the care system (Wellard et al., 2017).

We also know that we need to be more proactive at identifying potential Connected Carers before care proceedings and are now able to do this in Sefton through the creation of Family Connector posts and a move towards Family Group Meetings taking place. By identifying potential kinship arrangements sooner, we hope that children who cannot live with their parents’ experience fewer moves and more stability. Kinship carers are a remarkable national resource; moving forward in Sefton we want to improve our Special Guardianship offer to provide more children and young people with legal permanence via this route.

Number of Fostering Households in Sefton

On 31st March 2021, Sefton Fostering Service were supporting 154 mainstream foster carers and 114 Connected Carers. This equates to 85 mainstream foster carer households (68 couples and 18 single foster carers) - caring for 141 children and young people and 71 connected carer fostering households (43 couples and 28 single carers) caring for 147 children and young people.

Nationally, Ofsted estimated that at the end of March 2020, there were around 44,500 fostering households, in 431 agencies, with around 75,300 approved foster carers looking after around 56,500 children. It is estimated that there were around 137,200 initial enquiries from prospective fostering households over the year, an increase of around 7%. Despite this, there was a 10% decrease in applications to become a foster carer since March 2019. On 31 March 2020, the majority of fostering households had 2 carers. Single carer households accounted for less than one third (31%) of all households, the same proportion as in 2019. (National Statistics Fostering in England 2019 to 2020: main findings Published 12 November 2020)

Children Looked After Data

On 31.03.21, there were 615 looked after children (a rise of 8% since the previous year when there were 569 children looked after). Of these 615 children:

- 141 were cared for by Sefton mainstream foster carers
- 147 were cared for by Connected Carers (relatives/friends)
- 120 children were fostered by voluntary and independent fostering agencies
- 97 children were placed with their parents.

The remaining children were supported in residential settings, supported lodgings, semi-independent / independent living. 18 children achieved permanence via adoption. 26 young people chose to “stay put” with

foster carers post 18; offering them stability, support and more chance of life long links with those who knew them as children.

The ethnicity of the these 615 children is as follows:

- 550 children were recorded as White British
- 24 white background
- 10 mixed background
- 9 other ethnic group
- 5 White and Black African
- 5 White and Black Caribbean
- 4 Black British – African
- 3 Asian/Asian British Indian
- 3 Mixed – White and Asian
- 1 Black British other background
- 1 White Irish

60 children were recorded as having a disability.

The ages of our children were as follows:

- 28 children were under 1
- 131 children were between 1- 4 years
- 145 age between 5 – 9 years
- 221 children between 10-15 years
- 90 young people were between 16 and 17 years.

Placement sufficiency:

Our aim each year is to increase the number of mainstream fostering households so that we can offer more choice and ensure children's individuals needs are met. We have a specific need for more carers who can support young people over the age of 10 years, larger sibling groups, children with disabilities and complex needs and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. We have also seen an increase in requests for care of babies during the pandemic.

Research both locally and nationally has shown that recruitment of foster carers remains a challenge. We have seen an increase in the numbers of children and young people coming into care during the pandemic which has placed additional strain on limited resources. The Fostering Service recruited 5 new mainstream households during 2020/21 with a net gain of 1 mainstream household over the financial year. Some of our long standing carers have chose to retire this year.

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, it is recognised that an invest to save approach is required to increase sufficiency also, that the pandemic has impacted on progress in recruitment and assessment of new carers. We had hoped to increase new approvals over this last year however have to take into account the impact of the pandemic on staffing, delays with checks and medicals along with some applicants changing circumstances.

We recognise that retention of existing carers is of equal importance and the need to ensure that our "offer" remains attractive and appealing to new applicants. The Fostering Service is entering this new financial year in a stronger position with increased social work capacity; renewed enthusiasm and ideas. Our marketing strategy has been refreshed and we now have the benefit of an additional full time Recruitment & Marketing Officer to boost awareness and respond to enquiries and a full time Panel Advisor who will be responsible for quality assurance and advise to panel and others. It is hoped that these key posts will support us to increase the number of mainstream foster carers over this next year whilst managing an increase in requests for viability and connected assessments.

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 and deserve. 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 visibility to ensure new carers receive enhanced support at the right time; pen profiles of each foster carer mentor have been created for sharing and matching with new carers.

Hearing directly from our mainstream foster carers and Connected Carers is really important – we need to understand their “customer experience”. Foster carer feedback has increased over this last year as a consequence of improving consultation to inform our foster carer annual review process. We are planning an additional foster carer survey this year due to the pandemic and will be introducing foster carer exit interviews to capture any learning.

Activity and Performance 2020-2021

Our aim each year is to increase the number of mainstream fostering households so that we can offer more choice and ensure children’s individual needs are met.

Foster Carer Recruitment

The Fostering Service has a dedicated part time Recruitment & Marketing Officer who works alongside colleagues in Sefton Communications, Marketing and Strategic Support to plan and review marketing activity, to recruit foster carers and ensure ongoing retention. Additional capacity has been secured for 2021/2022 to recruit an additional full time Recruitment & Marketing Officer. Placement Support Workers have had more availability over this last year to support recruitment as we have had less face to face contact with children, carers and families due to the pandemic. It is hoped that their energies will soon return to more direct work.

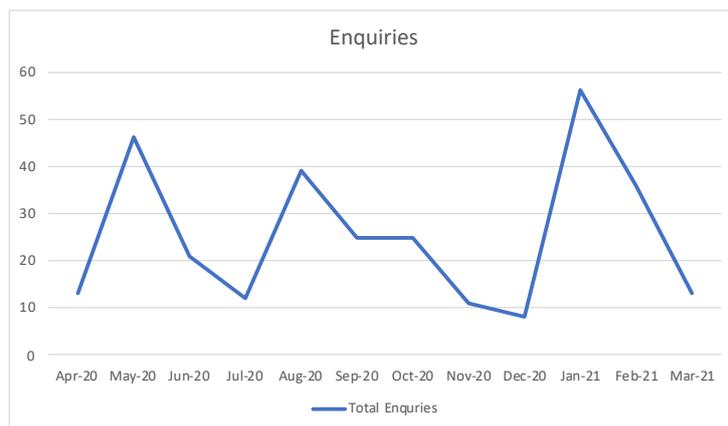
The recruitment of foster carers continues to be a challenge in Sefton in line with nationwide issues regarding the recruitment of carers. Sefton Fostering Service are competing with a number of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) and local authority neighbours within the Merseyside area. Recruitment of new mainstream foster carers remains a high priority for the service to ensure placement capacity and in-house sufficiency is maximised.

Sefton Council had an ambitious plan to recruit an additional 50 foster carers over 3 years. A more realistic target is considered to be 25 new carers over 3 years taking into account carers leaving the service due to retirement and other personal reasons. Focused developmental work around recruitment and retention is ongoing. We have considered our structure and processes and are reviewing our support offer, branding, website and marketing activity. Links have also been made with Liverpool City Region (LCR) partners to consider sufficiency and sharing of resources. Joint commissioning of services with other local authorities will also be considered. All of which, we hope will improve outcomes for children and young people.

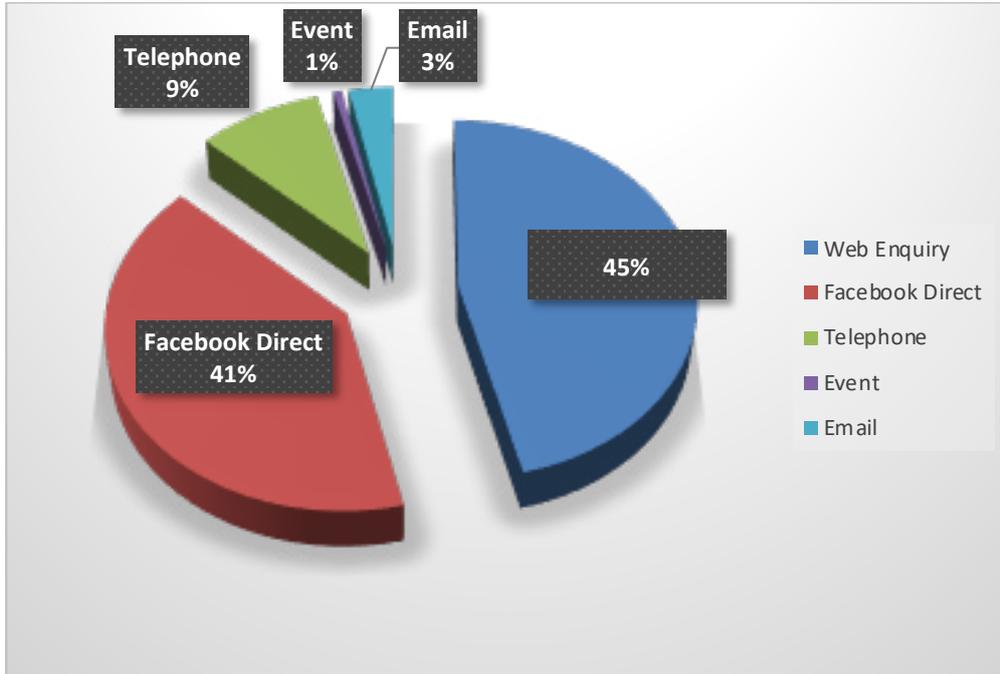
Fostering Enquiries 2020 - 2021

We received 305 enquiries this year. Enquiries have remained consistent in comparison to previous years (320 for 2019-2020).

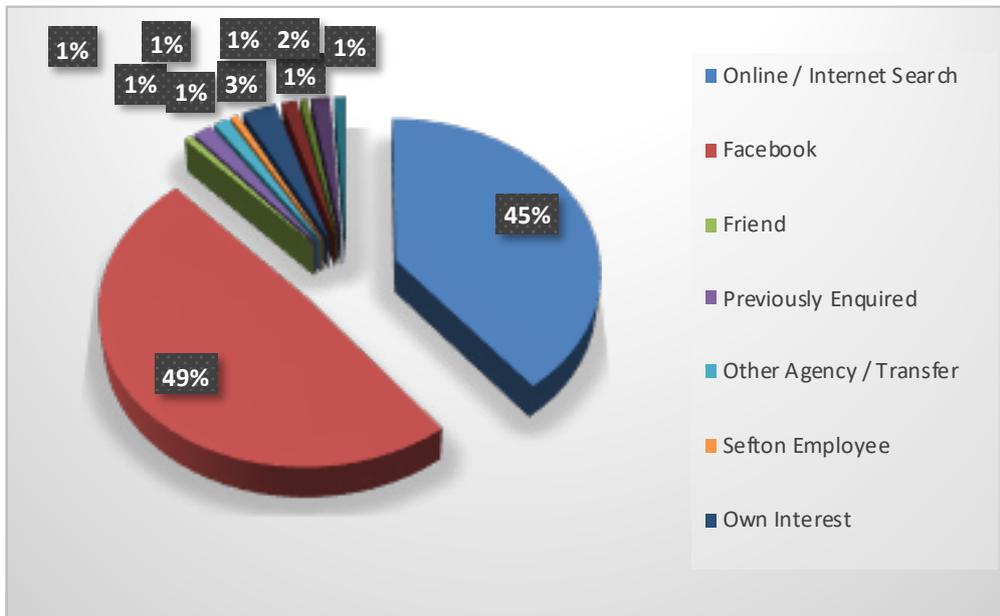
Apr 2020 - Mar 2021	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Total
Enquiries	13	46	21	12	39	25	25	11	8	56	36	13	305



Method used to make an enquiry (April 2020 – March 2021)



Source of Enquiry

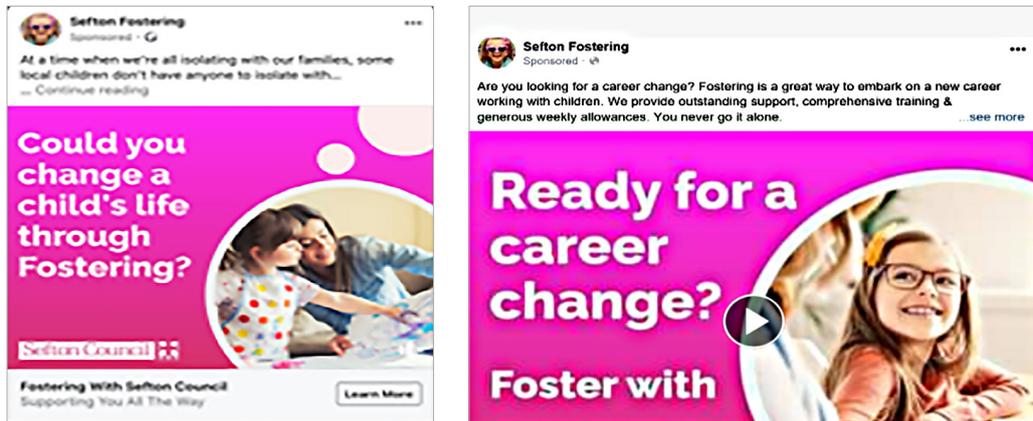


The two main sources of enquiry leads are generated by Facebook with 49% and online / internet searches with 45%. These figures are comparable with previous years.

During the year we have looked to increase our digital presence to ensure Sefton Fostering Service has greater visibility within the local community via social media platforms. Since 2019, we have been working with an agency who utilise digital marketing technologies to manage and optimise campaigns. Online platforms offer great flexibility to develop and change key recruitment messages. Digital campaigns have been further complemented by utilising internal communication channels and partner agencies. We have worked with foster carers to create video material using local parks and scenery which resonate with Sefton residents.

COVID 19 Response

Over this last year we have drawn on the national narrative of “pulling together”, ‘helping out; ‘isolating with families’ and messaging around some children not having a family to isolate with. For Foster Carer fortnight in May 2020, we recorded a series of catch up video interviews with our foster carers to see how they have been coping during the pandemic in their homes. We also took the opportunity to thank carers and celebrate their achievements.

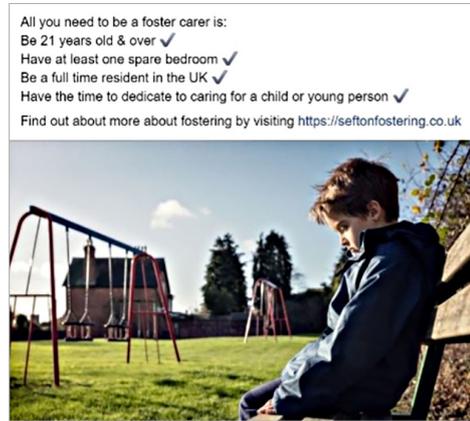


We have introduced new messaging; inviting applicants to consider fostering as a “new career path”. With employment instability/ people potentially being made redundant / increase in unemployment; we have promoted fostering as an alternative, rewarding career option.

This year, we have started to build a sense of brand identity with more focus on videos of real foster carers to increase authenticity and give a sense of locality. Appealing to people living and working within the Sefton and the wider Liverpool City Region. Looking to 2021, and beyond, we aim to strengthen ‘Sefton Fostering’ brand; and develop our own hashtag. We will continue to draw on support available from our foster carers who can bring fostering to life.



Many myths still exist around fostering which can mean that some people rule themselves out of fostering before they have even contacted our service. Our myth busting campaigns are aimed at dispelling some of these myths to encourage people to 'rule themselves in'.



Research conducted by the Fostering Network highlighted support as a key motivator when considering fostering options. Our Foster Carer survey further highlighted the importance of support and the influence it has on carers decision to progress with an agency. Throughout the year we have ensured that support features as one of our key messages.



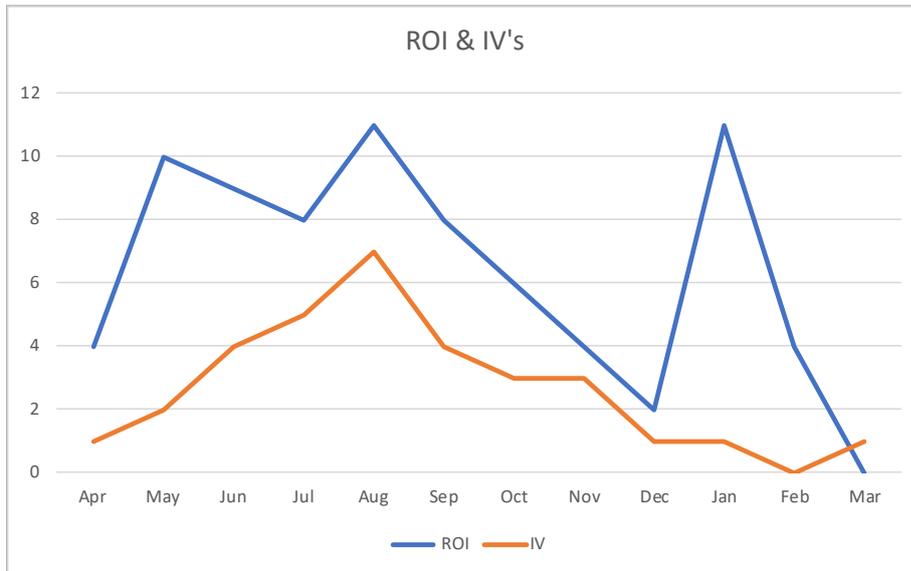
Fostering Information sessions and outreach

Information events give us the opportunity to showcase the benefits of fostering with Sefton. Children of the fostering family can attend these sessions if they wish to. These events allow for more informed conversations with prospective carers about some of our priority children and young people e.g. the experiences of teenagers, children with complex needs and brother and sisters.

During the pandemic, activities and opportunities to physically connect with others have undoubtedly been affected with many planned events having to be cancelled/postponed. No face to face information sessions have ran but we have been able to offer events on line. The Recruitment & Marketing Officer accompanied by a foster carer have co-delivered virtual sessions. We have seen a reduction in the number of attendees at our online events in comparison with previous face to face events. Once restrictions lift, we hope to offer a combination of face to face opportunities and 'online chats'. We also intend to run some weekend events.

Registrations of Interest/Initial Visits

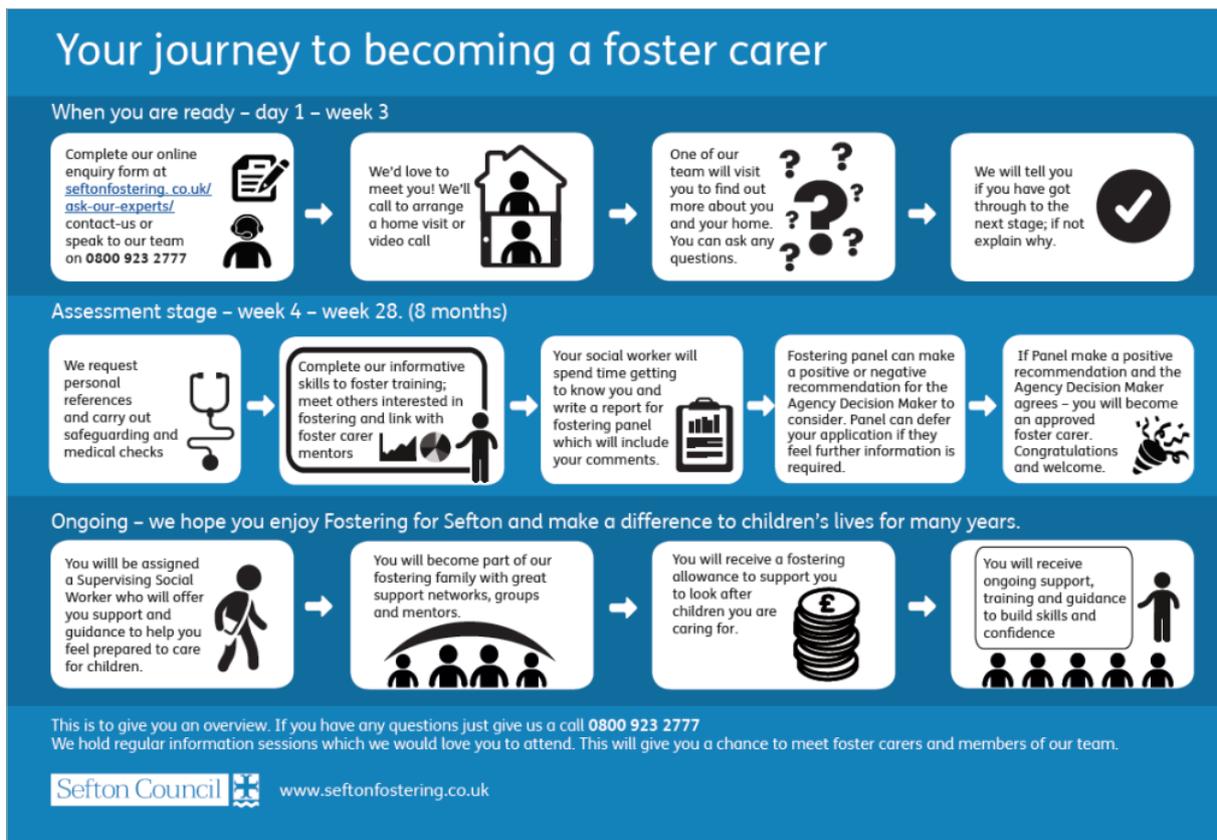
We have completed 77 Registrations of Interest (ROI) and 32 Initial Visits (IV) over this last year. 25% of enquiries progressed to a ROI and 10% of enquiries progressed to an initial visit. 24 assessments were commenced throughout the year. As of 31.03.2021, 14 assessment were in progress.



Response to enquiries

Fostering Network research indicates that people typically contemplate fostering for 3 years. We know that the response they receive to their initial contact will influence whether they proceed with the Council when they are ready, hence why we have increased our capacity to respond to enquiries by planning for an additional Recruitment & Marketing Officer.

Our current approval target time is 8 months; from enquiry to approval. The application process has been streamlined and additional Skills to Foster Training courses and Fostering panels have been arranged, at times of increased recruitment activity. A new fostering visual has been produced to provide clear timescales and set expectations for prospective carers.



As a service we have been able to offer prompt responses to enquiries and initial visits. The 'Skills to Foster' training was changed to an online course and additional dates were added to accommodate increased levels of interest. "Skills to Foster" courses have been running monthly, alternating between Mainstream and Connected Carer groups. The pandemic has impacted on the capacity of the assessment team and has led to some delays in allocations for assessments, checks and references. We have attempted to address this issue by front loading checks and references and via the temporary recruitment of two agency social workers to focus on mainstream fostering assessments. This has allowed for more timely allocation of assessments however, we have still faced delays due to agency staff leaving, delays with medical and DBS checks; also, personal references and overseas checks. As a consequence of the pandemic some assessment sessions have not taken place as planned due to people having to self-isolate.

Fostering Panel Activity

Mainstream Fostering assessments/terminations	
Mainstream foster carers – positive recommendations to approve	5
Mainstream assessments deferred	1
Mainstream assessments – negative recommendation	1
Mainstream termination of approval	4
Connected Carer assessments/terminations	
Connected Carers – positive recommendation to approve	24
Connected carer assessments deferred	5
Connected Carers – negative recommendation	1
Connected carer termination of approval (reasons included – Special Guardianship Order granted, children turning 18, children ceased to be living with the connected person)	17
Annual Foster Carer Reviews – Connected Carers and Mainstream Foster Carers	
First annual reviews	4
Subsequent Annual reviews	11
Reviews deferred	0
Other reports	0

Mainstream Fostering assessments

5 new mainstream Foster Carer households were approved throughout the year – a net gain of 1 household.

Of these carers, 2 households were approved as respite carers for children age 0-18 years. 1 fostering household was approved as short-term carers for 1 child age 5- 18 years. 2 fostering households were approved as short and long terms carers – 1 for 2 children aged 0 – 18 years; the other for 3 children aged 0 -18 years.

Work is planned to improve data collection/demographics so that we can report next year on age range of carers, ethnicity, sexuality, relationship status, disability.

It is our longer term aim to create a third fostering team which will allow for greater focus on mainstream assessment work as requests from court impact on the teams' capacity to prioritise and complete this work in a timely way.

Connected Carer assessments

Viability assessments

A viability assessment is undertaken by the Child's Social Worker when considering the likelihood of carers being able to meet the physical and emotional needs of children; now and throughout their childhoods. The Fostering Service may be asked to undertake viability assessments of a number of family members during care proceedings. All viability assessments in the initial stages should be informed by soft police checks and later a Disclosure and Barring Service Check (DBS) check. If a positive viability assessment is completed, a comprehensive connected person assessment will likely follow.

The Fostering Service received 160 requests for viability assessments over this last financial year; an increase of 7 assessments from the previous year. Some requests did not proceed to a viability assessment as they were deemed inappropriate; in other cases, the applicant chose not to proceed with the assessment following contact with Sefton Fostering Service.

Regulation 24 – temporary approval of carers

Where a child cannot be looked after by a parent, the Local Authority (LA) has a responsibility wherever possible to consider family/friends. Regulation 24 (Care Planning, Placement Case Review England Regulations 2010) allows LAs to place children on a temporary basis with family members or Connected Carers subject to further assessment. Regulation 24 expires at 16 weeks. The Fostering Service and the Child's Social Worker are responsible for undertaking a fuller connected persons assessment within 16 weeks. A date for presentation at Fostering Panel before 16 weeks should be agreed at allocation and a Regulation 25 extension requested if the assessment exceeds 16 weeks.

38 households were approved on a temporary basis in accordance with Regulation 24 between 1st April 2020 until the 31st March 21. On 31st March 2021, there were 23 households caring for children placed under Regulation 24. The remaining 15 households were either granted Special Guardianship Orders; approved as Connected Carers, children ceased to become looked after or the court made a direction for the child to be assessed under Section 38 (6) Children's Act 1989).

Regulation 25 extensions

Regulation 25 (Care Planning, Placement Case Review England Regulations 2010) provides the Local Authority with a further 8 weeks to complete the Connected Carers assessment (up to 24 weeks). Sefton Fostering Service requested 6 extensions from 1st April 20 until 31st March 21. Work is planned to improve understanding across Children's Social Care in respect of Regulation 24/25 timescales and requirements as it is acknowledged that this has sometimes been misunderstood.

Special Guardianship Orders (SGO)

21 Special Guardianship Orders have been granted over this last year.

The Fostering Service has continued to offer specific preparation training for Connected Carers and Special Guardians in the form of a 2-day course named Kinship Plus. We plan over the course of the next financial year to improve our training and support offer to Special Guardians. During the pandemic, Adoption Support Fund Money was made available which allowed Sefton to access support available from Kinship Charity previously named Grandparents Plus. 37 families were referred to Kinship during this period. Sefton will continue to commission Kinship membership support over the next year.

Staying Put

Our aim is to support young people and carers to retain life long links. 26 young people have chosen to “stay put” with their foster carers this year; affording them the chance of stability at an important stage in their life journey (allowing them to remain with their foster carer until their 21st birthday if they wish to). Carers can continue to access training provided by the Fostering Service and the young people have their own designated Personal Advisor from the Leaving Care team. Some young people have remained with foster carers post 21; others have returned home in between University and retained relationships for many years beyond this. Carers are provided with an allowance in recognition of their ongoing support and the young person is also expected to contribute as part of growing up and taking responsibility.

Early Permanence

Stability and early consideration of permanence must be considered for every child and young person. Careful matching at the earliest opportunity with permanent carers to reduce disruption, uncertainty and instability is key. Early consideration of family members during care proceedings needs to be routine practice in order to plan well for children and young people; reducing the risk of disruption and change later. More long-term foster carers are required as this can be a positive option for some children and young people.

It is recognised that 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 when this is consistent with the individual child’s plan. Once it has been identified that permanency is required, a more robust and targeted approach to family finding is required. Sefton have over this last year trained workers in family group meeting techniques. This will enable early consideration of a child and families support network; bringing together family and family friends when times are difficult.

The Fostering Service is considering its offer to Special Guardians as this is also another way of achieving physical, emotional and legal permanence for children and young people. Our wish would be to create a 4th team within the fostering service to focus on kinship support.

Fostering Panel Membership

The Fostering Panel is established and acts in accordance with the regulatory framework provided by The Fostering Service Regulations Act 2011 and standards set in the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2011. The Fostering Panel also considers legislation set out in the Children Act 1989 and the Care Planning and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and relevant guidance.

The Fostering Panel has responsibility for making recommendations in respect of:

- Approval of foster carers – short term, respite and long term
- Approval of family member and friends – “Connected Carers”
- First annual reviews of Foster Carers and Connected Carers and any subsequent annual reviews presented e.g., following significant changes, allegations, concerns around suitability.

Current membership of the Fostering panel is:

Panel Members & Their Roles	
Chris Dingley	Panel Chair – Independent Social Worker
Linda Woodcock	Independent Social Worker / Vice Panel Chair
Jacqui Greenall	Independent member
Jan Harding	Independent Social Worker
Abigail Hitchen	Independent Social Worker - Barnardo’s
Sasha Thompson	Care Leaver / Member of Make a Difference group
Bill Markham	Independent Social Worker
Bernie Allen	Independent member / foster carer
Karen Blair	Panel Administrator

The newly appointed Panel Advisor will be responsible for the cost and volume of panel business; ensuring timely and quality assured assessments and annual foster carer reviews are presented; the central list of members is maintained and updated to ensure panel quoracy. Fostering Panels have continued to take place throughout the pandemic; these have taken place virtually via teams – 26 panels have been convened in total.

The Fostering panel receives medical advice from the Fostering Medical Advisor based at Alder Hey Children’s hospital. The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) is responsible for final decision making - ADM is Laura Knights, Head of Children’s Social Care.

Quarterly meetings with Fostering Panel

Last year, we committed to improving communication with Fostering Panel by setting up quarterly meetings. Four meetings have taken place since October 2020 which have proved useful for sharing ideas, plans, perspectives and addressing issues as they arise. We are fortunate to have committed panel members who wish to support the Service with identified improvements. Efforts have been made to increase panel membership to ensure a representative and diverse membership. In the absence of a health representative, questions have been obtained from designated Local Authority Children Looked After nurse and CAHMS practitioners and advice has been sought from The Emotional Wellbeing Board. The Make a Difference group (MAD) have also provided questions from a young person's perspective and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROS) have consulted with young people, obtained questions which have been shared with Fostering Panel. Sefton CAHMS have offered to provide training to panel members later in the year on resilience. An additional team member will join business support who will be trained to undertake the Fostering Panel Administrator role alongside Karen Blair.

Foster panel feedback

After each fostering panel, the Panel Chair and its members are asked to provide feedback on assessments and reviews presented. Social Workers and carers who have attended are also asked to complete a feedback form as are any observers at panel.

Feedback from Social Workers attending panel

“It was a pleasure to share and receive positive feedback for the dedication and hard work that our foster carers do on a daily basis.”

“This was my first experience of Sefton’s Fostering panel. Thank you for making it a positive one”.

“Panel was running almost 2 hours late due to the previous item which has a massive impact on the rest of the working day.”

“I am disappointed that panel felt they did not have the information required to make a decision on this item today. I have put ‘no’ for whether I felt listened to as a verbal update/explanation to panel today was not sufficient for them to proceed. There appears to be a significant disparity between the management quality assurance process of social work reports & panel’s expectations. This leads to panel feeling like an exercise in picking apart social work reports.”

Observers to panel

“I was made to feel welcome by all the members of the panel, who were friendly and approachable. The Chair signposted what was happening throughout the day. I found the experience useful for my own professional development and it gave me an insight into how the panel operate and what they look for in an assessment.”

“It was very useful to be able to observe the entirety of Panel, particularly the conversations that happen between panel members in discussing cases and the questions that are raised before social workers and carers attending. It has given me

more awareness to complete assessments with the thought of what would panel think of this?"

Carers to panel

"We can honestly say we were dreading the meeting and we were very nervous, but the Team leader and the team couldn't have been more considerate to us and they made it so much easier to talk to them and take them into our confidence."

"Extremely happier than happy, thank you."

Fostering Panel to Sefton Council – Panel Chair and members are asked to grade information presented to panel as very good/ good/ adequate or poor. Feedback has varied across the year with some examples below.

Adequate – "Some gaps identified especially around impact of recent losses on the applicant and changes since young person came to live with her. Also, not clear when previous registration as a foster carer ended and no feedback from college."

Adequate – "Child social worker's part of the report was brief. Assessing social worker report provided more information and detail, however there was significant issues that had not been explored in the detail required."

Good – "The part report, and termination report were of good quality and provided a lot of detail. The concerns were set out clearly and there was an additional email to the legal department that went through the fostering standards that were not met. This was very useful but should have been in the fostering and termination report."

Very Good – "The report had plenty of detail and examples contained within. It had good levels of analysis and it was clear that files had been read and information checked & verified. Examples of this was previous LA involvement within the family had been discussed and clarified clearly, as had attendance issues for one of the children, with clear evidence of checking out what the issue had been."

Foster Carer Annual Reviews

A Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) was in post up from 31.03.19 – 14.09.20. During this time, the FIRO completed 84 annual foster carer reviews. An agency FIRO was employed in October 2020 for 3 months.

Since January 2021 the service has been without a FIRO; efforts to recruit a temporary FIRO have proved unsuccessful. It is realised that a full time FIRO is required due to the number of carers to be reviewed. Recruitment is planned. First annual foster carer reviews have remained a priority to complete and present to Fostering Panel.

Over this last year, Fostering Panel has had oversight of 4 first annual reviews with recommendation for continued approval by panel and ADM. There have also been 11 additional reviews presented to panel. No annual reviews were deferred over this period.

Further improvements to the review process have continued; the annual foster carer review document has been updated; is now more user friendly and easier for Fostering Panel, carers and Agency Decision Maker (ADM) to follow. Consultation forms still need to be embedded into LCS for social workers and IROs. Once complete, we will be able to extract data in respect of completion. Attendance at FIRO regional meetings has continued to share good practice, learning and contribute to creation of regional practice standards. Without a FIRO in post, progress has been limited but the foundations exist for better working and compliance in this area once we are able to appoint.

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. We also attempt to gather feedback from children of the foster family, adult children, any children who have been fostered over the review period, IROs, Children's Social Workers, schools and other agencies if applicable.

The voice of children who are looked after should inform annual foster carer reviews. Currently, Children's Social Workers are asked to gather their feedback prior to the review taking place; consultation forms can be used or other forms of engagement to gather their feelings, views and wishes. Efforts have been made over the year to increase feedback – a video was prepared during early lockdown by the FIRO, Principal Social Worker and 2 Children's Social Workers to reiterate its importance. Gaining feedback has remained a challenge; often requiring Supervising Social Workers to pursue this. The importance of this information has been emphasised via the video and at all Managers Meetings. The FIRO when in post attended all team meetings to explain expectations to include the importance of observation when children are pre verbal.

Further work will be undertaken to ensure that all children/young people are provided with numerous inclusive opportunities to communicate their feelings about the care that they receive.

Foster Carer Retention

Due to the pandemic, we have not had as much face to face contact with our foster carers as we would have liked. The Fostering Service innovated quickly by setting up an online training offer relevant to Connected Carers and mainstream foster carers; ensuring new courses were available as well as access to mandatory first aid and safeguarding training. Face to face visiting has continued when possible; virtual meetings and telephone support have been used as an alternative.

Over the course of the year, 4 mainstream foster carers have ceased to be registered and 17 Connected Carers.

We have found that some carers plan to finish fostering after a commitment ends to caring for a particular young person, others reach retirement age. Sefton Fostering Service want to better understand why our mainstream foster carers leave this service. To this end; liaison has taken place with an Independent Social Worker who will undertake exit interviews with mainstream foster carers who wish to take up this opportunity. We want to know what we have done well and what if anything we could have done differently or better to retain them for longer. Some of our Connected Carers who cease to look after a family member may wish

to transfer to mainstream fostering. Supervising Social Workers will consider this as part of their ongoing involvement.

We are fortunate to have a number of carers who have chose to foster with Sefton for many years. We like to show we value our carers in different ways and will be considering how we can acknowledge their committment more this year.

We were unable to hold an annual fostering conference in May 2020 due to the pandemic. We celebrated Foster Carer Fortnight on social media and plan this year to hold a virtual raffle for our carers in the absence of a conference for the second year.

Support groups

Foster Carers have continued to support each other through the pandemic. Mainstream carers have access to a private Facebook page which they find useful. We now have 8 foster carer mentors and 2 additional digital mentors who were recruited during the pandemic as social media was being relied on more and we felt that additional support and information could be beneficial.

The Fostering Service are in the process of setting up a monthly virtual support group for mainstream foster carers, Connected Carers and Special Guardians to access. The group will be facilitated by the Fostering Team Manager and 2 Supervising Social Workers who will organise for different guest speakers to attend such as IRO, EDT, Virtual School, Careers Connect. The Fostering Service is hopeful that this support group will complement the existing 2 coffee morning support groups facilitated by the foster carers; giving foster carers different options to access support, information and advice. We intend for these monthly meetings to remain virtual as they allow foster carers to access support from their home without needing to secure childcare. We plan over the course of this next year to produce regular newsletters also.

Foster Carer Training & Development

Training

Over the period of the pandemic we have redesigned the training programme to adapt to social distancing requirements. By May 2020, all pre-approval training was taking place online. Adaptations were made within weeks of the beginning of the pandemic to ensure that carers could continue to undertake training and continue their progression with the skills scheme.

Evening webinars proved popular with many carers to offer support with the challenge of maintaining self-care and offering the best possible support to children whilst coping with isolation and high levels of change.

Topics have included: Keeping your head above water but not treading water, Managing Blowouts, staying grounded in times of uncertainty, buckle up and hang on for the ride, Surviving caring in times of crisis.

Since January 2021, Sefton Therapeutic Service have been offering online workshops for foster carers to access.

Carers comments- Sefton Fostering webinars

Safer care and allegations

“Good content and group interaction, 3 speakers meant a good blend of styles and expertise.”

Keeping your head above water but not treading water

“The course was a real eye-opener. I have never thought about this kind of response to a child’s behavioural pattern. Making sure that you are alright yourself before trying to connect and solve problems with the child. It really makes sense. Dr Tina Goodson got her points across really well. I found the suggestions like having foods for comfort and use physical activities to calm them to be intriguing.”

Online Training

754 online courses completed via the Foster carer Training Hub.

Topics covered included	
Safety	Health and safety, Fire Safety, Internet safety, safeguarding, food safety and hygiene, knife crime prevention, child sexual exploitation
Health	First Aid, Psychological First Aid, Depression and Suicide, Health and Nutrition, Asthma, Infection Control
Values	Every Disabled Child Matters, Equality and Diversity, Black Lives Matter, Positive Risks
Skills	Advocacy, reporting and recording, managing allegations, Data protection
Pandemic	Corona virus outbreak, Impact on covid on young people, learning together - early years and infants, isolation, lifting lockdown
Behaviour	Managing challenging behaviour, emotion coaching, de-escalation and young people
Fostering Task	Transitions and Vulnerability, Contact and Birth family
Understanding Childrens needs	Gangs and county lines, Autism spectrum disorder, caring for sexually abused child, ADHD, positive identity and self esteem
Therapeutic Parenting	Play Therapy, Secure attachment and Bonding

Carers comments via the Training Hub

Black Lives Matter

“It has signposted me to further learning for me, helping me focus on how to educate the child I care about racism and we can all work towards stopping it. On practical note, I realise I have to buy more varied resources to have them available in my home.”

Equality and Diversity

“The course helped me to be more mindful of my day to day life and being a positive role model.”

Food Safety and Hygiene

“The Course will definitely alter my usual daily routines. It will help me in my preparation and storage of foodstuffs, separating cooked and uncooked food, checking fridge temperatures, cooking temperatures and not overstocking fridges etc.”

Gangs and County Lines

“I have learned what to look out for if a young person became involved, the course has given me more confidence to approach the situation and how to bring it up calmly & the right things to say.”

The Training and Development Officer takes pride in ensuring that our training offer is rich and varies from year to year; whilst ensuring important mandatory courses remain available and are accessible. It is important that our offer makes sense to mainstream foster carers, Connected Carers and Special Guardians. Feedback from our foster carers is that they value the training which is consistently rated good.

Foster Carer Survey

We received a total of 42 responses to our annual survey which was sent to our foster carers via email and post to consider and complete. This represents a 47% increase in response rate compared to 2019. Hearing the experiences of our foster carers is key to our progress and so we are continually thinking of ways to improve the response rate. We will be refreshing our foster carer survey and issuing a Spring edition this year; making it more meaningful to mainstream and connected persons who will be sent different surveys in recognition of some of the nuances in their fostering roles.

The preferred way to complete the survey was online; with 65% of carers completing it online and 35% via a postal copy. The survey was sent to both mainstream and connected persons foster carers.

Following the analysis of the survey an open letter was sent to all carers, sharing the findings of the survey and outlining the Fostering Service's responses.

Foster Carer responses

We asked how valued carers felt

84% of carers felt well valued by the Fostering Service. Carers felt the organisational culture within Sefton is one of respect and co-operation, were carers are valued, they can access excellent training and are respected for the difficult role that they do. Carers generally felt equipped to carry out their role.

We asked carers how they felt about the support they received from the service

Overall carers felt well supported by their Supervising Social Worker, Children's Social Workers and the Fostering team. With 95% of carers stating they felt satisfied with the support they receive from their Supervising Social Worker and 86% feeling satisfied with support from the fostering team. Whilst most felt satisfied, some carers did describe feeling more isolated especially if they were working in employment as well as fostering.

We asked carers how satisfied they are with the communication they receive

87% of foster carers were very positive about communication. Some carers felt that it was good, but with some room for improvement. Carers expressed concern that last-minute changes to times of meetings or contact sessions were not always communicated well and requested more notice be given. There are structures and processes in place to ensure that the Fostering Service have clear channels through which to raise issues experienced by carers with the wider teams within Children's Social Care.

For Foster Carers that had previously fostered with a private agency, we asked what their main reasons for moving to Sefton had been.

Carers said; The frequency, locality and complexity of children's needs were all factors in their decision to move to Sefton.

Comments about being a Sefton Council Foster Carer

"Carers are valued, very well trained and respected for the difficult task that they do. I regret not making the move sooner."

"Support networks have been fantastic, not only for us but young people as well."

"I have always had help and support from both social workers when needed especially during COVID, they went above and beyond."

"Training is brilliant, and it can always when possible be worked around your schedule. During COVID online training, meetings and groups were excellent."

"Support from children's social workers can be mixed. The current child care social worker has been good, but the level of support from other children's Social Workers has varied."

"I am proud to be a Sefton council foster carer. The help, support and encouragement given is amazing. The training is excellent and gives a chance to meet and talk to other people."

"We have obviously had trying times but overall it has been a very enjoyable and worthwhile experience. Working with not only experienced staff but also a lot of staff willing to at times let common sense rule the day, which really eases placements when needed."

"Organising contact often takes too long to get everyone together. It would be good to have more family support workers available if we are struggling to transport children to school when we have other appointments that overlap that we don't want to cancel."

"We feel valued in that we know we are doing something important that matters and all of the social workers we've met so far have been great people doing a very difficult job. However, the financial side of things leaves us feeling under-valued."

Foster Carer Handbook

The foster carer handbook was written and launched in Summer 2020. Our aim this year is to improve this handbook further; considering feedback from foster carers, Fostering panel, FIRO and strategic support colleagues. This document is in the process of being refreshed. Our plan is to produce a separate financial handbook later in the year.

Foster Carer File Audits

We have introduced foster carer file audits within the service, and continue to learn from wider children services audit activity and feedback from annual foster carer reviews. Auditing of foster carer files by Fostering Managers and the Panel Advisor will be planned. Dip sample audits on for example the quality and frequency of supervisory and unannounced visits will also be considered.

Foster Carer exit interviews

We have recruited an independent person to complete exit interviews with all mainstream foster carers who leave the service; who wish to take up this opportunity. First interviews are planned to take place in April 2021 and will take place on a fixed date each month. We will review the process after 3 months to ensure it is effective. Some carers will leave fostering due to their life stage, age, health, personal or family commitments. Others will not be able to continue to foster due to concerns around care or due to their own personal circumstances. Whatever the detail, we want to know what if anything we could have done differently and learn from this. We also want to build on what we are doing well. Retention is as important as recruitment and we are keen to get this right to achieve better outcomes for children and young people.

Allegations

The Pandemic has impacted on stress levels within the home; foster carers and children have been at home together for longer periods of time. In some circumstances, allegations about a foster carer are made and these are discussed with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO). 10 foster carers (7 fostering households) have been subject to allegations over the last financial year – 7 allegations related to physical abuse, 1 sexual, 1 emotional and 1 neglect. Of these 10 cases, 4 concluded within the year. The outcomes were – 1 substantiated; 2 unsubstantiated and 1 malicious (one carer was subject to two allegations as an additional allegation was made whilst investigating the initial allegation). 1 referral was received but was closed as a contact as it was clear that it did not meet the threshold for LADO.

Timescales were adhered to in 4 cases – completed in under 1 month (30 days). 1 allegation was completed in under 3 months (90 days). There were 5 allegations relating to 4 carers. One carer had two allegations concluded at the same strategy meeting.

The LADO has highlighted 2 key themes:

- Impact of Covid - Foster carers and children have been at home together for longer periods of time during the pandemic. Supervising Social Workers and Children's Social Workers have been undertaking some visits virtually; so, have been less able to observe family interaction and identify strain in relationships early on. Foster carers; particularly those caring for larger sibling groups have faced considerable challenges at times.
- 3 allegations related to Connected Carers who had not been engaging with their SSW or attending recommended training. The Fostering Service had struggled to support the carers to meet National Minimum Standards and held concerns prior to the allegation about their ability to meet the child's individual needs.

The LADO and Fostering Service Manager plan to undertake a further dip sample audit in Autumn 21 with some focus on this area; responding to /escalating concerns as they arise and consideration of early annual

foster carer reviews.

The LADO has also supported foster carer training throughout the year and worked alongside the Training and Development Officer to revise guidance and policies relating to allegations.

Independent Review Mechanism (IRM)

If approved foster carers or prospective carers are unhappy about recommendations made by Sefton Fostering Panel and decisions reached by the ADM, they can appeal the decision through two mechanisms. One option would be to request that another Fostering Panel hear the matter again and another would be to refer the matter to the IRM.

Over this last year, the Service has had 1 IRM request with a date to attend in July 2021.

Complaints and Compliments

Sefton Fostering Service received 3 compliments and 3 complaints over this last year.

Compliments:

“Thank you for organising the payment. You are the most organised Social Worker I have met.”

A carer had spoken to inspectors and advised that she felt very supported; “that she could not ask for better support”. A door step visit had been made to the child during the pandemic (by the social worker) to introduce herself rather than the first contact being via a teams call. The foster carer had really appreciated this acknowledging the lessons we give children around stranger danger and online safety.

Another service user had complimented a Placement Support Worker on her professionalism and also said she was brilliant with their own children.

Complaints

3 complaints have been received over this last year. Of these, 1 was not upheld., 1 was upheld, and Senior Managers were made aware of the issues raised. Another complaint was partly upheld.

2 complaints were withdrawn.

Response to Covid – 19 Pandemic

It is well documented that the Corona virus pandemic has had a profound impact on the way services have operated, particularly during the “lockdown” phase of the Government issued guidance. Sefton Council has been subject to tier 3 restrictions during 3 periods over this last year which has exacerbated some issues. The Fostering Service has maintained regular communication with its foster carers throughout the pandemic offering support, information and covid guidance updates as appropriate. Our foster carers were granted priority 2 access to the Covid -19 vaccine as part of the social care workforce roll out; recognising their vital contribution to social care and the importance of their good physical health.

The pandemic has impacted on everyone in different ways; sometimes placing pressure of family relationships, carers health and placement stability. Overall, we have observed placement stability. Some Fostering households have described a strengthening of relationships with children; some children and young people have benefited from fewer pressures and felt content and secure in their foster homes. Foster carers have supported young people in maintaining their home schooling and in developing new home-based activities to do together. Foster Carers have also supported children and young people in maintaining contact with their birth families. New communication techniques have been embraced. Our observations are backed up by Elizabeth Reeves, Policy and Advocacy Assistant at the Children Commissioners office in England who has stated that “for many children with a stable home environment, lockdown brought some welcome respite from the everyday stresses.” (The Fostering Network – May 2021 edition).

There have been difficult situations and challenges for our foster carers who have shown resilience and worked with any challenging behaviours and supported our young people to retain stability. Foster carers have been supported virtually and through regular support calls from their Supervising Social Workers and in their absence duty social workers, Placement Support Workers and other professionals.

Our usual way of supporting foster carers, through home visits needed to change for a period and we saw that social workers embraced this and, in many situations, contact levels with foster carers increased with weekly phone calls, Skype calls and Microsoft teams being used much more offering new communication links for future flexible working. Foster carers also chose to communicate via WhatsApp.

Supervising Social Workers and Assessing Social Workers have been supported with clear guidance about how to respond during the pandemic. Children’s teams have continued to play a key role in offering practical support such as food deliveries also, Fostering Managers have showed appropriate discretion in approving additional payments where appropriate to foster carers. Some of our foster carers and children were in the shielding categories and so we needed to work differently to support them. Staff sickness and changes within social work teams has undoubtedly created some issues around consistency and delay.

The Local Authority chose to incorporate Children Act 1989 Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020. The medical self-declaration form was used for ongoing assessments in order to prevent delay for approval at panel and Regulation 24 amendment for non-related children to support them with any demand for placements during the pandemic.

Achievements during 2020/2021

Sefton Fostering Service had ambitious plans for 2020/2021; some of which we have still managed to achieve despite the pandemic and Sefton Council being subject to tier 3 restrictions during 3 periods over the last year. We are proud of our foster carers who have supported our children and young people, adapted to unprecedented circumstances, Government and local authority Covid -19 guidance and advise to keep themselves; their families and the children and young people they care for safe and secure. For any of our foster carers reading this annual report, we thank you.

As a service we also needed to adapt quickly to virtual working when government advise was to stay at home. We made efforts from the outset to ensure that our foster carers knew we were there for them and kept them informed via letter about important information relating to covid guidance, family time and vaccinations.



We have continued to work with our foster carers and mentors to ensure their participation and views shape service improvements and delivery. Several of our foster carers have worked with our systems lead to test new payment methods via CONTROCC. Foster Carer mentors' views have continued to be sought and greater efforts made to link newly approved foster carers with mentors. As part of wider demand management work, a strategic support colleague has met with 5 foster carers approved within the last 2 years and 2 foster carer mentors to consider the application and assessment process; their "customer journey."

The Fostering Service has continued to prioritise team meetings and team development throughout the pandemic and the team have also had access to additional welfare clinics facilitated by the Principal SocialWorkers. Since the Interim Service Manager has been in post, monthly service meetings have been in place to team build, share information, service plans and vision. Team development sessions have considered good assessments, foster carer annual reviews, responding to allegations, learning from audit and team strengths –what we are proud of. The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) and Fostering Network have contributed to sessions.

In previous reports, it has been highlighted that fostering performance data was lacking. We now have access to data in respect of timeliness of unannounced visits, management oversight and supervision of staff. This remains an area of development and requires further work this year. We have also scrutinised recruitment processes as part of wider demand management work and worked with our systems lead to make necessary adjustments to LCS to add checks and balances in respect of timescales. We have developed a more robust management tracking system to ensure timescales are met for friends and family assessments.

We planned to update a number of policies and procedures to support the Fostering Service and our foster carers. Our statement of purpose has been updated and the exemption policy, annual review policy and savings and pocket money policy are all in the process of being updated.

We planned to strengthen support available to Connected Carers via commissioning services from Grandparents Plus/Kinship Connect. Sefton has referred 37 families over the last year to this service who have benefited from advice and support. We will recommission this service (now named Kinship) to retain support for our carers.

The Fostering Service remains interested in innovative models of working; namely the Mockingbird Family Model which Josh MacAllister, Chair of the independent Review of Children's Social Care believes should be available in every local authority as a key support model for children who are looked after. A cost/ benefit analysis has been undertaken and a meeting was held with Leeds Local Authority in July 2020, attended by then Corporate Parenting Service Manager, FIRO and 2 foster carer mentors. We gained detailed feedback from Leeds Council Fostering Service, a hub and satellite carer and learnt of the benefits for children supported via this model. Sefton are considering this model for the future but do not envisage this being in place over the next year. It is our priority to get the basics right every time, to ensure timely assessments, visits and reviews and to improve our offer to Connected Carers and Special Guardians. With greater management oversight and reflective supervision, permanence planning for children and young people who are being cared for by our foster carers can be considered more fully. Fostering Managers attend all managers meetings and Practice and Performance meetings to ensure they have an overview of wider service issues. Meetings have also taken place with legal and CAFCASS over the last year to gain further insight into drift and delay.

The Fostering Service cannot be effective if it works in isolation. Over this last year, we have developed closer links with Children's Services locality and Corporate Parenting teams, completed joint auditing of foster carer files with LADO, liaised with Children Looked After nurse to ensure health messages are sent to our foster carers and with CAHMs to consider training for our Foster Panel members. Work with Independent Reviewing Officers, Commissioning and our Corporate Parenting Officer/MAD group is ongoing to consider savings and pocket money policy and children's guide for young people in care. Fostering Managers and the Recruitment and Marketing Officer attend fostering leads events and the Interim Service Manager manager attends FIRO regional meetings and Liverpool City Region groups to consider best practice, sufficiency and joint working. Interim Fostering Service Manager and commissioning have worked together to refresh the Sufficiency Strategy for children and care leavers.

The Fostering Service could not have achieved what it has without the ongoing support of our foster carers and interest from the community who wish to support local vulnerable children. Showing our carers how much, we value them, and their families will remain a priority. Celebrating national events such as Sons and Daughters month and Kinship Care week in October 2020; running a Christmas card competition for children who are looked after and children of the foster family at Christmas time.



Janet Blundell and Nicky Holyland – members of our committed Business Support team preparing certificates for children of the foster family to celebrate Sons and Daughters month in October 2020.



Winning designs from our Christmas Card competition which were then sent to all of our foster carers at Christmas time with biscuits and chocolates.

Management Priorities for 2021/2022

Our foster carers are a wonderful resource, their engagement will remain a priority for the service. In May 2021 - Foster Carer Fortnight #Whywecare - we will raise awareness and celebrate with our carers with a spectacular online raffle.

An additional Spring Edition Foster Carer Survey will be forwarded to our carers which will be followed by an open response letter. Exit interviews will be available from April 2021 to ensure learning from those carers who leave the service. We will refresh the Foster Carer handbook and plan to create a separate Financial handbook; also, set up monthly virtual catch ups with the Fostering Service for our carers.

Placement choice and sufficiency remains a challenge within Sefton; regionally and nationally. Invest to save approaches continue to be considered recognising benefits for children and young people of in house foster care and cost savings compared with out of borough placement costs. Ongoing work with Strategic Support and finance will look at our foster carer offer – payments and lifestyle benefits. A whole family approach will be our focus. Foster Carers Independent Support Service (FISS) membership will be in place for applicants at stage 2 of the assessment process.

We plan for targeted work with Children with Disabilities team beginning with introductory events in Spring 2021; reaching out to those already offering support to children and young people via direct payments or employment at Springbrook or Aiming High.

We hoped to make more improvements to Sefton Fostering website than what has been achieved. Progress has been delayed due to service priorities and also as we wish to learn from leisure services who intend to make improvements to their website this year. With additional marketing capacity planned, improvements to the website and our branding will be a big focus this year. We need to ensure that interested people can learn about fostering via Sefton Council site; not just via accessing the fostering website.

This year we will refresh our Special Guardianship policy, consider our offer to those carers who wish to pursue Special Guardianship. Work is underway to progress this with input from Kinship Charity and in partnership with representatives from other Local Authorities.

We have identified that it is important to recognise and identify placement difficulties early on to reduce the risk of placement breakdown and ensure adequate support for foster carers, children and young people who require this. Stability meetings will be considered during the next year and wider policy development.

We will continue to consider performance and our quality assurance framework to ensure oversight and scrutiny of work completed by the fostering service; compliance with regulations; with regular Regulation 35 reporting on the effectiveness of the service.

We are exploring an opportunity to work with Stable Lives charity in Parbold, Lancashire <https://stable-lives.co.uk> They use horses and ponies that they have rehabilitated from exposure to mental and physical trauma to provide a link to individuals or children who may be struggling with low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, PTSD etc. The horses are utilised within courses and respite days to build confidence, self-worth and new skill sets for those attending giving new hope and focus for the future.

We will improve representation on our Fostering Panel; remain committed to quarterly meetings; panel training and appraisal.

We will consider with Corporate Parenting teams good practice in respect of support, review and contact with carers who support “staying put” arrangements.

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