

Coventry Fostering Service Annual Report 2020 - 2021

The purpose of this report is to inform the Cabinet Member about the work undertaken by the Fostering Service between April 2020 and March 2021.

The performance of Coventry's Fostering Service is critical to delivery of high-quality local placements that can meet the diverse needs of Coventry's looked after children.

The report summarises the activity of the service over the past 12 months. It highlights the success of the service in increasing both the number and the proportion of looked after children who are placed with foster carers approved by Coventry City Council. It also highlights the ongoing development of the work of the connected persons teams.

Coventry City Council is committed to ensuring that, wherever possible, children are supported to live with their birth parents. Where this has not been possible and children become looked after, it is preferable that they are placed within a family setting. It is the aim of the council that wherever possible this will be within a foster placement approved by Coventry rather than through commissioning an external placement. Through guidance on delegated authority, there is a recognition that foster carers should be empowered to take on the day-to-day tasks of parenting in the same way as any good parent would

Foster care is subject to legislative and regulatory guidance through, The Children Act 1989, The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the Fostering services: national minimum standards 2011. It is further regulated through the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations published in 2010. The regulatory framework for fostering sets out the minimum standards expected to ensure that the care provided by foster carers is adequate to ensure that those children placed within fostering placements are well cared for and achieve good outcomes.

Fostering placements are referred to as either mainstream or connected persons. Connected persons fostering refers to those households who offer to provide care to a child known to them, usually a relative. Mainstream refers to a range of households who apply to become foster carers for children not known to them. Mainstream foster carers include those offering both long-and short-term care and those who provide short breaks (respite) care. Mainstream carers can be approved to care for between 1 and 3 children at a time and can care for children throughout the age range.

The Fostering Service sits within Children's Services as part of the Looked After Children service. It is comprised of 6 teams and has responsibility for the recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers and the assessment and support of special guardians.

A sixth team was created in September 2020 as a result of the growth in the number of mainstream foster carers. This team is responsible, alongside two other teams, for the supervision and support of mainstream foster carers. Each foster carer is allocated a supervising social worker and, following the growth of the service to meet this increased supervisory workload a growth in management capacity was required. Alongside the growth of both social work and management capacity, additional support was provided to meet the increased workload through 3 new children and family workers and growth in professional support to the service.

In addition to the social work teams there is a Recruitment and Development Officer and a Panel Advisor both of which report to the Operational Lead.

The Fostering Transformation Project

The Fostering Transformation Project began in April 2016 and was concluded in March 2021. The project was part of the wider Children's Services transformation plan and had the overarching target to increase the proportion of looked after children placed with foster carers approved by

Coventry. This both enables more looked after children to be placed within or close to Coventry and to decrease the reliance on more expensive externally commissioned placements. The Transformation Project targets were updated and extended in both February 2019 and April 2020 with the target for 31/3/21 to have 286 occupied internal mainstream placements. Whilst the Transformation Project has now concluded there are continued growth targets for the service as part of the placements mix strategy. The current agreed target is for there to be 306 occupied internal mainstream placements by 31/3/22.

The number of children placed in internal mainstream placements rose from 259 on 31/3/19 to 266 on 31/3/21. This is a 5th annual rise in this number from a baseline of 149 in April 2016. This number was below the targeted growth for the year. This reduction in the speed of growth was largely attributable to the impact of the Covid – 19 pandemic.

At the end of March 2021, there were 747 looked after children. Of these 747 children 542 children were placed in foster care of which 382 were placed with Coventry foster carers compared with 357 at the end of March 2020. This equates to 70% of those children in foster care. 160 children were placed with independent fostering agencies which is a slight rise from the 147 in these placements on 31/3/20. Of the total number of looked after children 51.1% are placed with Coventry foster carers. This is the same proportion as 31/3/20 and maintains this improvement in this percentage from a baseline in March 2015 when only 22.8% were placed in internal foster care.

Marketing, Recruitment and Mainstream Approvals

Marketing and Recruitment activity was adjusted during the year because of measures put in place due to pandemic. These measures meant that some opportunities for recruitment such as community events and festivals did not take place. It also resulted in information and “meet the team” needing to be held via virtual platforms. However, despite these changes marketing and recruitment continued and numbers of enquiries to the service remained strong. Planned recruitment events with Coventry’s Muslim Forum were postponed due to the national lockdowns

The Fostering Recruitment and Development Officer continues to use digital marketing strategies in an innovative and effective way. She also continues to chair a regional fostering marketing forum and host a national forum for local authority fostering marketing leads.

A 4th regional recruitment film project planned for 2020 was postponed due to the pandemic.

Coventry has a strong social media presence established with interactions from media and existing carers. Recruitment activity has included extensive use of social media such Facebook and Twitter. Our online content on the website is regularly updated.

The following table provides statistics for patterns over time in relation to the recruitment of mainstream foster carers:

Mainstream carers	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Approved households	152	170	184	187	196
Number of initial enquiries	387	703	815	609	552
Expressions of interest following enquiry					156
Assessments started at stage 1	186	143	151	91	83
Assessments commencing to stage 2	66	61	58	58	64
Number of households approved	25	31	33	21	23
Conversion rate - enquiry to full assessment	17%	9%	4.4%	9.5%	12% (any contact) 41% (expression of interest)
Conversion rate – stage 2 assessment to approval	38%	51%	57%	36%	36%

Conversion rate enquiry to approval	6%	4%	4.04%	3.4%	4.2% (contact) 14.7% (EOI)
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For this review period the service has included an additional measure to delineate between those people whose enquiry is purely for further written information and those who actively express an interest in applying in becoming a foster carer. Reviewing this information shows that of those who expressed an interest in fostering 14.7% proceeded to full approval.

There was a slight reduction in the number of fostering enquiries in the period between April 2020 and March 2021. Month by month patterns indicate that enquiry numbers fell at a higher rate during the national lockdown periods and then rose during months when restrictions were eased.

Conversion rates between enquiry and assessment and between enquiry and approval have risen.

During the review period, work has been undertaken within the recruitment team to analyse the reasons that applicants drop out during assessment and to ensure that the service progresses applications as efficiently as possible to prevent this.

There was a rise in the percentage of foster carers from a BAME background approved by Coventry City Council from 15% to 16.2%. However, this is still lower than the percentage of looked after children from a BAME background which is approximately 32.5%. There is ongoing focus on this area in our marketing strategy.

There was a rise in the number of new fostering households approved during 2020-21 from the previous year. The recruitment of foster carers remains below target, however and requires ongoing focus

Of those foster carers approved by Coventry 3 households transferred from another fostering agency. One was approved as mainstream foster carers having previously been approved as connected persons foster carers.

Occupancy of Mainstream Placements

Coventry's mainstream foster carers now provide an average of 1.9 approved placements per household. The total number of approved mainstream placements on 31/3/21 was 380. The occupancy rate of approved placements fell from 78% on 31/3/20 to 70% on 31/3/21. In part, this reduction in occupancy was a result of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic as detailed later in this report. However, the service retains close oversight of occupancy and regularly reviews supports on offer to foster carers to enable them to develop and grow the range of placements they are able to provide.

Foster Carer Retention

In 2020-21, 14 mainstream fostering households ceased to foster. Two individual foster carers ceased to foster as they separated from their partner. Two fostering households transferred to another agency, one following a concerns process and another moving to foster for the children's trust (IFA) closer to their home.

The retention of foster carers has improved from the previous year. There is regular review of the reasons for carers ceasing to foster and all those who choose to move on are offered an exit interview with a manager in the service.

Reason	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Permanence plan for child (including Staying Put)	0	1	2	4	0

Transfer to another LA fostering service / children's trust (IFA)	0	1	1	1	1
Transfer to an independent fostering agency	0	0	0	0	1
Personal circumstances e.g. separation, bereavement, retirement	19	12	10	12	4
Decided fostering not for them					5
Dissatisfied with quality of service	0	0	0	0	1
Safeguarding (termination)	0	0	0	0	0
Resigned prior to quality of care and safeguarding issues	1	0	2	1	1
Other – including death	1	0	1	0	1
Total	21	13	15	18	14

One carer cited dissatisfaction with the support provided by the service as a reason for them ceasing to foster. This household had previously resigned on similar grounds then returned to foster for Coventry. There were more households who decided that fostering did not suit them and 3 of these had only been recently approved. Work is underway in the service to improve the communication in the recruitment stages to ensure applicants have a clear sense of the task prior to approval.

Connected Persons Fostering

The number of children cared for in a connected persons fostering arrangement approved by Coventry City Council has continued to rise over the past year. There were 98 children being cared for in this way on 1/4/20 and 117 on 1/4/21.

The aim for the majority of these children is that, if they cannot return to the care of their parents, they go on to have legal permanence with their carers via a Special Guardianship Order. Over the past 12 months, the service has focussed on ensuring the supports are made available to foster carers to become special guardians and this has resulted in an increase in the number of children ceasing to be looked after through this route (33 for 2020 -21).

The connected persons teams have also developed a number of bespoke supports to those carers they supervise during the year. This includes a support group, a specific newsletter and a tailored pre-approval training course entitled Skills to Care.

As part of the Coventry Family Valued programme, the initial stages of the assessment of connected persons foster carers will transfer to the connected persons team from being the responsibility of the children's social worker. There will also be an expanding focus on how to improve the support to connected persons carers in order to ensure that wherever possible children can remain in their extended family network.

Support to Foster Carers

The service has continued to focus on the consistency of support given to foster carers through ensuring consistency of the supervisory relationship, regular visiting patterns and that annual reviews of the foster carers' work take place.

A review of the process for foster carer supervisory visits is underway with two focus groups having taken place with foster carers for initial feedback and suggestions.

The service produces a monthly newsletter for all foster carers which includes contributions from a range of contributors including colleagues in health and education.

The Annual Foster Carers' Conference was due to take place in June 2020 and was delayed as a result of the pandemic. The conference took place virtually on 25/9/20. The theme was, "Fostering in the 21st Century". This included both a key note speech and a choice of workshops as well and was attended by around 95 fostering households.

Other events where the service and Council acknowledges the valuable work our foster carers do were also affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Sons and Daughters events, the regular welcome events for newly approved carers and the annual foster carer appreciation event could not take place. However, foster carers and their birth children were provided with tokens of appreciation and thanks at regular intervals during the pandemic including a voucher for birth children and Christmas hampers. The Foster Carer Christmas Party took place virtually on 10/12/20 and included a performance from the Coventry City Council Staff choir.

The service provides an 'out of hours' telephone support for foster carers at all times - outside office hours through the fostering service on call rota.

The service runs a monthly support group for connected persons foster carers and special guardians alongside regular social events for those carers and their households.

In March 2021, a revised process for accessing sessional support to enable placement stability was launched. This enables the service to access support from either a practitioner based in the Edge of Care service or from a commissioned service where fostering placements are unstable and additional support from within the service has not proven effective in maintaining these.

The Mentoring Scheme launched in June 2020 with five experienced foster carers who helped the two Mentoring Co-ordinators to design the scheme. Since then there has been ongoing recruitment and the scheme now has 16 mentors, including one from the Next Steps Scheme. The mentors have so far supported 27 other foster carers. This includes 19 newly approved mainstream foster carers and two Next Steps carers, who were linked either just before attending Fostering Panel for approval or shortly afterwards. We have also matched mentors with experienced foster carers, including one connected persons foster carer, to provide support with particular areas of fostering – including managing particular aspects of children's behaviour, the impact of fostering on birth children and dealing with an allegation.

A new induction programme was devised for newly approved foster carers in March 2021. This comprises a rolling programme of 6 workshops to support these carers in developing in their role.

All foster carers approved by Coventry City Council are provided with membership of the Fostering Network. This membership includes access to the Fostering Network's independent Advice and Mediation service.

Training and Development of Foster Carers

Foster carer training is provided through the Council's Organisational Development Team. This includes both mandatory courses ensuring that foster carers have the training necessary to undertake their role and more in-depth training for those carers who want to develop particular specialisms or a deeper knowledge of a subject area, for example attachment or caring for teenagers. In order to maximise the training offer to foster carers, wherever possible practitioners from the service facilitate the training for foster carers. During the past year face to face training has been unavailable and so, with the exception of first aid training, courses have taken place virtually. During the year there has also been increased take up of e learning courses by foster carers as an alternative to virtual courses in a group setting.

The Fostering Service contributes to monthly meetings to plan and coordinate the training offer. These meetings also include a foster carer representative.

The Fostering Service has supplemented the training offer for foster carers by providing a range of developmental activities including presentations at support groups and learning resources.

Workshops have also been provided on topics such as adverse childhood experiences and social pedagogy.

The service also continues to run regular refresher training for those foster carers who have completed the mandatory training. Foster carers are expected to undertake this every 3 years in order to keep up to date with their practise.

Preparation and training groups have been held for all prospective mainstream foster carers. The training, which is delivered by the fostering team, involves foster carers as well as care leavers. These groups have been facilitated virtually throughout the review period due to the pandemic restrictions.

The service continues to support newly approved foster carers in completing the mandatory Training Support and Development Standards (TSD). There is an adapted version of these standards for connected persons foster carers and there is an expectation that any connected person carer completes this within 18 months of approval.

Over the past 12 months, 2 practitioners in the team have undertaken a pilot programme alongside the West Midlands Teaching Partnership exploring the use of social pedagogy for foster carers looking after the children under the age of six years of age. There were six mainstream foster carers and one connected person carer who chose to take part in this project. Participants took part in eight group sessions between December 2020 and March 2021. Sessions were delivered remotely but activities were interactive and materials provided. The group explored key thinkers and models and facilitated reflection on parenting styles. All carers agreed that they found each session beneficial to their practice and made them more reflective about their caring approaches. The findings from this project are due to be published through Coventry University.

The Foster Carer Association / Foster Carer Consultation

All Coventry approved foster carers are members of the Coventry Foster Carer Association although participation is voluntary.

Between March and December 2020, the Foster Carer Association was dormant as the annual general meeting, at which a new committee would be elected, did not take place due to the pandemic. However, members of the previous committee continued to provide peer support to foster carers through hosting a social media group and running support groups for foster carers where restrictions allowed. A new committee was elected in December 2020 and regular monthly meetings resumed virtually. Social events run by the Foster Carer Association have not been possible due to the pandemic.

Foster carers are represented in a variety of ways within the wider children's services including in foster carer training, the corporate parenting board and interviews for new staff members. A foster carer also sits on the governing body of Coventry's virtual school.

Consultations with foster carers take place on a regular basis. This year these have included; a review of the support from the looked after CAMHS service, a review of the commissioned contact centre, a focus group on additional allowances and a review of the arrangements for foster carer supervision. Foster carers were regularly consulted in relation to changes to practice during the pandemic.

Fostering Panel

Over the course of the year, the Fostering Panel met on 40 occasions. This table gives a summary of the cases presented to these panels.

Category	Number 2020/21

Mainstream applications (Form F)	24
Connected Persons applications (Form C)	89
Connected Persons Extension to Regulation 24 – 16 - week temporary approval period	16
Foster Home Reviews	41
Foster Home Review - updates	10
Foster Home Reviews – post allegation	6
Long-Term matching reports	22
Exemptions	7
Changes of Approval	25
Resignations and de-registrations	Total number: 54 Connected Person - SGO granted 22 Connected Persons - other reason Mainstream 16 (including 2 partners who left the household)
Updates / Notifications	14
Appeals to Panel	1 - Mainstream

At the start of 2019, Coventry recruited a new Panel Chair and she remains in post. Coventry's Vice Chair has been a panel member for 12 years and took on the additional role as Vice Chair 8 years ago. Coventry recruited a second Vice Chair at the start of 2020, who has been an independent panel member for Coventry since 2014. A new Panel Advisor was appointed in September 2020.

Due to measures resulting from the pandemic, each Fostering Panel has taken place virtually. This has necessitated some changes to the panel process in particular around the preparation undertaken by panel members prior to the panel.

A panel training day took place in November 2020. Updates were provided on the work of the panel and changes to the fostering service. There were also sessions on substance misuse, disguised compliance, cultural competence and the legal framework for fostering.

Coventry's central list has 28 panel members (including the Chair, Vice Chair and Second Vice Chair). There have been four new panel members recruited in the last year, two external members: one (white British female) with a background in fostering and the other (white British male) with experience in the family courts and the health service. The other

two are social worker representatives within Coventry Children's Services: one social worker (Black British female) and one Team Manager (British Asian female).

The Panel Advisor and either the Panel Chair or Vice Chair has completed 20 appraisals of panel members between September 2020 and April 2021. The Agency Decision Maker alongside the Panel Advisor has completed the panel Chair, Vice Chair and Second Vice Chair's appraisals. The outstanding appraisals are due after new members have completed their first year.

The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children observed panel in March 2021 and gave positive feedback from his observations of panel.

The fostering panel has focussed this year on improving the way in which long-term fostering matches include those children whose match is being presented. This has resulted in children being more involved in the panel discussions and the processes around this being altered in order to enable this.

The Panel Advisor has also produced an information leaflet for young children attending virtual panel for their long-term match, to help them understand what will happen in panel.

The Panel Advisor has quarterly meetings with the Agency Decision Maker, Panel Chair and Vice Chairs and Panel Support Officer. Meetings have been booked for the next year, to discuss panel business. This is an opportunity for the ADM to discuss any difference from the recommendation of panel, the Agency Decision Maker decision and the reasons behind this, to update on issues or changes in the fostering service and discuss and agree any necessary changes.

Fostering Schemes

The Next Steps fostering scheme was launched in May 2018 to provide intensively supported fostering placements to those children who might otherwise be placed in a children's home . Five households had been recruited as at 31/3/21. One of them has progressed from mainstream fostering to Next Steps. The scheme's criteria has been amended this year and now allows two placements per household once the Next Steps child has been stable for a period of twelve months. So far one Next Steps carer has taken up this option. The existing five placements supported through the scheme remain stable which has meant significantly improved outcomes for the children placed with Next Steps carers. All prospective Next Steps carers attend a two day 'understanding trauma and challenging behaviour' training course which is also open to mainstream foster carers and staff.

The fostering service also runs an out of hours fostering scheme to provide placements to those children who need these in an emergency outside office hours. There has been active recruitment to this scheme to develop its ability to provide sufficient placements for these children. However, demand for these placements is still greater than availability. A review of the criteria for the scheme was undertaken and changes made in April 2021.

Service Performance

During the past twelve months, the service has continued to focus on ensuring that records of work with foster carers demonstrate the impact that this is having and reflect compliance with the regulatory framework. In August 2020, the recording guidance for the service was updated and workshops were held with all staff to launch this. A new quality assurance checklist was also devised to enable fostering managers to provide consistency in overseeing case records.

Alongside observations of practice and consistent supervision of social workers these measures have improved the ability of the service to review its work.

The fostering service actively participates in both regional and national forums to promote improvements in our support to fostered children. The Operational Lead chairs the West Midlands Regional Forum for local authority fostering registered managers.

An update was made to the children's recording system in August 2020 to enable the service to more effectively monitor and promote long term fostering matches.

The Impact of Covid 19

Throughout the period covered by this report both fostering households and the fostering service have been significantly impacted, like the rest of the country, by the Covid-19 pandemic.

For foster carers this has led to a number of additional pressures including children spending more time in the home, children being educated from home for periods of time and changes to the availability of activities and events. Many children have had changes to their family time arrangements including for some periods this being facilitated through a virtual platform.

A number of fostering households were unable to consider further placements during the period of the pandemic. The reasons for this included risks to household members due to health vulnerabilities, anxiety around the challenge of new placements when access to child care support was reduced and changes to household membership due to lockdowns reducing physical space (for example adult children returning home for a period of time). The impact of this reduction in capacity has varied across the year but has resulted in around 20 fostering placements being unavailable at any given time.

Foster carers have been consulted with both collectively and individually to review the supports provided to them during the pandemic. For lockdown periods, many visits have taken place virtually but where needed face to face visits have been available at all times. The service has ensured that all activities during the pandemic period including fostering and children's social work visits and family time arrangements have been individually risk assessed and that the needs of all fostering household members have been considered within these risk assessments.

Financial Impact

	2018/19 £000	2019/20 £000	2020/21 £000
Budget	5,932	5,566	6,321
Expenditure	4,719	5,435	5,843

Internal fostering continues to be one of the most cost-effective placements for looked after children, on a unit cost basis. Expenditure continues to increase as the service grows, but this is more cost effective as well as providing quality outcomes for Coventry children. The budget will increase as appropriate in future years to reflect increased targets. Additional resources will also be made available as necessary to expand the internal fostering team to support the increasing numbers of foster carers.

Fostering fees for 2020/21 were increased by 1.5% from 2019/20 levels in order to recognise the impact of inflation and to ensure that our rates remain competitive with those of surrounding local authorities.

Future Priorities for the service

- Continuing work to increase the proportion of looked after children placed in an in-house fostering placement.
- Maximise the capacity of internal foster carers and increase the children placed in internally.
- Conclude work on improving conversion rates between enquiry and approval.
- Extend the range of in-house fostering provision to include increased availability for parent and child placements and placements for children with complex additional needs.
- Recruit further carers to the in house out of hours rota of foster carers to ensure placements are available as needed outside office hours.
- Continue to review and strengthen the training and development offer to foster carers.
- Develop an academy model to increase and coordinate the support offer for newly approved foster carers
- Undertake Coventry Family Valued work to ensure connected persons arrangements are in place where appropriate and to promote timely permanence in these arrangements.
- Work with Coventry Family Valued Programme to improve support to connected persons foster care and special guardianship.
- Work with commissioning colleagues to improve the quality of assessments that are completed on a sessional basis.
- Conclude update to supervisory visit arrangements.
- Continue to ensure foster carers are consulted about all changes that affect their role.

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