

# Coventry Fostering Service Annual Report 2022-23



Coventry City Council

## **Coventry Fostering Service Annual Report 2022-23**

The purpose of this report is to inform the Cabinet Member about the work undertaken by the Fostering Service between April 2022 and March 2023.

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. 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. This enables a joined-up approach to caring for the children alongside enabling them to remain close to their home and community.

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 and the Assessment and Approval of Foster carers guidance 2013. There are also subsequent changes relating to placement of children under 16 and those aged 16-18 as a consequence of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 and the Supported Accommodation (England) Regulations 2023 respectively. 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 temporary and permanent foster care and those providing short breaks or short stays and those approved within the out of hours, next steps and parent and child schemes. Next Step carers, offer intensive care and support to children who are at risk of being placed in a children home, or can move from a whom. These children generally have a high level of complex needs and carers are offered enhanced support to meet needs. Mainstream carers can be approved to care for between 1 and 3 children at a time and can care for children throughout the age ranges of 1-18.

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, who will have applied to the courts for legal guardianship (parental responsibility) for the child.

In addition to the social work teams there is a Panel Advisor and a Fostering Service Development Coordinator both of which report to the Operational Lead. The work previously undertaken by the Marketing and Recruitment Officer is now undertaken within the Mainstream Recruitment and Assessment Team.

### **Ongoing Fostering Growth**

The Fostering Service has grown significantly in the past seven years. The Fostering Transformation Project took place between April 2016 and March 2021. The project was successful in increasing the number of occupied internal mainstream fostering placements from 149 to 266 during this period. The work of the Connected Persons Team has also grown since 2017. Initially, this was as a result of improvements in the consistency of practice in supporting connected persons households as foster carers. Since April 2021, these improvements in support to Connected Persons Foster Carers and Special Guardians has been strengthened by becoming a key workstream of the Coventry Family Valued Programme. It is the aim of Children's Services that as many children who become looked after as possible, can be supported to live with a connected

carer. Around half of all children looked after in Coventry are cared for by a fostering household approved by the Fostering Service.

Following the end of the project, ongoing targets for growth continued to be set to enable more looked after children to experience family life close to their home. However, these targets have not been met, with the number of children living in a mainstream fostering household remaining largely static since March 2021. On 31/3/23 there were 266 children placed in an internal mainstream fostering placement. This was a shortfall on the target for this number to be 285. The current target for occupied internal mainstream placements is to be 299 by 31/3/24.

At the end of March 2023, there were 726 children in the care of Coventry Children's services. Of these 726 children 499 children were placed in foster care of which 362 were placed with Coventry foster carers. This equates to 73% of those children in foster care. This is an increase in the percentage from 69% in March 2022. 137 children were placed with independent fostering agencies which is a sharp decrease from the 163 in these placements on 31/3/22. Of the total number of looked after children 59.8% are placed with Coventry foster carers. This is a similar percentage to that on 31/3/21 although the overall number of looked after children is impacted by the rise of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children placed in supported accommodation in Coventry through the National Transfer Scheme.

### **Fostering Excellence Project**

In response to the lower than planned growth in internal mainstream fostering, the service began work with the commercialisation team to consider ways to address this. This work is titled the Fostering Excellence Project. The project was started in October 2022 and aims to address the barriers to ongoing growth through 3 overarching workstreams: -

- Brand Awareness & Marketing Activity
- Improved Processes & IT Infrastructure
- Departmental Review including enhanced foster carer training.

### **Marketing, Recruitment and Mainstream Approvals**

During the period of this report, recruitment of foster carers has continued to take place both face to face and virtually. The team have hosted a stall at the Godiva festival alongside smaller drop in and meet the team sessions at local libraries and coffee shops. There was a recruitment event in the Broadgate Square on Valentine's Day. The team have worked closely with the communications team to broaden the use of council sites to market for foster carers. This has included regular use of electronic screens in council buildings and bus stops, promotional flags and screening the fostering recruitment film in the Broadgate Square at Christmas.

There have been some challenges with the use of digital marketing through the year due to changes in the algorithms of the social media companies. This has meant that some promotions were less effective and less targeted. It is evident that marketing for foster carers in the future will need to be more innovative and wide reaching as the period of digital marketing success appears to be tailing off for both Coventry and other fostering agencies.

The team continue to participate in both west midlands and east midlands regional fostering recruitment forums and a national fostering recruitment social network group, in order to share ideas and best practice in recruiting foster carers. The service is also part of a national benchmarking forum for local authority services to consider where areas of success are and learn from these. This data, though, helpful does not yet provide sufficient clarity to judge the work the service does effectively against regional and statistical neighbours.

Coventry participated in a 5<sup>th</sup> recruitment film project which was launched in October 2022. These films are now used by local authorities around the country to promote fostering.

The fostering service has updated its outward facing website to make information more interesting and accessible. Foster carer testimonials are used throughout marketing to recruit more carers.

The marketing strategy was updated in March 2023. This now incorporates the unique selling points for the service and the “Foster with Coventry” as detailed later in this report.

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

<b>Mainstream carers</b>	<b>2018/19</b>	<b>2019/20</b>	<b>2020/21</b>	<b>2021/22</b>	<b>2022 /23</b>
Approved households	184	187	196	202	204
Number of initial enquiries	815	609	552	504	709
Expressions of interest following enquiry (EOI)			156	52	48
Assessments started at stage 1	151	91	83	42	37
Assessments commencing to stage 2	58	58	64	42	35
Number of households approved	33	21	23	20	16
Conversion rate - enquiry to full assessment	4.4%	9.5%	12% (any contact) 41% (expression of interest)	8% (any contact) 81% (expression of interest)	5% (any contact) 73% (expression of interest)
Conversion rate – stage 2 assessment to approval	57%	36%	36%	48%	43%
Conversion rate enquiry to approval	4.04%	3.4%	4.2% (contact) 14.7% (EOI)	4% (contact) 38% (EOI)	2% (contact) 33% (EOI)

This year there was a rise in the number of overall contacts with the service, compared to the previous year to 709 initial enquiries. However, of these there were fewer enquirers who progressed to an expression of interest in pursuing an application with Coventry. There was a reduction in both the percentage of those expressing an interest going through to assessment and in those starting full assessment becoming approved. The reduction in the conversion rate from initial contact to approval and from expression of interest to full assessment saw particularly marked reductions.

Many other fostering agencies in the country saw a net reduction in fostering households during the year and it is positive that this was not the case in Coventry. However, the reduction in the overall number of approvals is disappointing and requires ongoing focus. It is unclear nationally what the cause of this is but many fostering services hypothesise that the cost of living crisis has a bearing on people’s readiness to take on the fostering task. However, the reasons behind the decline in conversion rates will need further analysis as the current year progresses in order to ensure that sufficiency targets are met.

There was also a slight decline in the percentage of foster carers from a minority ethnic background approved by Coventry City Council from 17.3% in 21-22 to 16.9% in 22-23. This continues to be lower than the percentage of looked after children from a minority ethnic background which is approximately 35.8%. There is ongoing focus to address this area in our marketing strategy.

Of those foster carers approved by Coventry in 2022 -23, 6 households transferred from another fostering agency.



## Occupancy of Mainstream Placements

Coventry's mainstream foster carers continue to provide an average of 1.9 approved placements per household. The total number of approved mainstream placements on 31/3/22 was 389. The occupancy rate of approved placements fell from 68% on 31/3/22 to 66.6% on 31/3/23. This is a continued decline from 70% in the previous year and represents a significant challenge in achieving targets for sufficiency.

Analysis of those placements which are unoccupied shows that around 40% are unavailable as carers do not currently want to consider further children. Others are unoccupied for a variety of reasons including those foster carers who are in the process of introducing a new child to their household, those carers who provide short stay foster care and those foster carers who are in the process of reducing their approval numbers. Some carers are unable to take further placements whilst they are subject to the allegations process. Some carers are unable to take further children due to the complexity of needs of the children already in the household. Around 17% of unoccupied beds are vacant for new children to be matched with. This represents around 2% of all approved beds. However, the service retains close oversight of occupancy and regularly reviews support 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 2022-23, 14 mainstream fostering households ceased to foster. Three individual foster carers ceased to foster as they separated from their partner, whilst the partner continued to foster. The overall number of households leaving the service has remained stable over the past 3 years and below numbers ceasing to foster in previous years. This indicates high level of foster carer retention at just over 93%. This is also well above the national average retention rate of 87%. 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	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Permanence plan for child (including Staying Put)	2	4	0	1	0
Transfer to another LA fostering service / children's trust )	1	1	1	0	0
Transfer to an independent fostering agency	0	0	1	1	1
Personal circumstances e.g. separation, bereavement, retirement	10	12	4	7	6
Decided fostering not for them			5	3	3
Dissatisfied with quality of service	0	0	1	0	1
Safeguarding (termination)	0	0	0	0	2
Resigned prior to quality of care and safeguarding issues	2	1	1	2	1
Other – including death	1	0	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>

One foster carer left the service stating that they were not able to manage financially on the fostering fees and allowances. One household decided to move to an independent fostering agency, stating dissatisfaction with the training offer available to Coventry foster carers. One foster carer stated dissatisfaction with the support provided to foster carers in her resignation but had also been subject to challenge around her practice. Two mainstream fostering households were de-registered on the grounds of unsuitability.

## **Progressing permanence for fostered children.**

A significant feature of the work of the Fostering Service is promoting permanence for looked after children. During the course of the year, 35 children who had been fostered achieved permanence through a special guardianship order and 9 children had their fostering placement confirmed as their long-term home.

During the year the fostering panel advisor led a project to review both the documentation and processes for long-term fostering. This has led to improvements in the way this type of permanence is recognised and the way it is communicated to children.

## **Stability**

The service continues to focus on ensuring that fostering arrangements are stable. Support to enable this is made available through the supervising social worker and through training and development opportunities. Where additional support is needed, the children and family workers work with the household for a period of time. This can include bespoke training or direct work and will often focus on particular challenges for example, how to put training around behaviour that challenges or attachment in to practice.

In March 2023, placement stability was a key focus of the fostering service development day reflecting on the learning from an analysis of placement disruptions over the previous year and reviewing support available to prevent these.

## **Connected Persons Fostering**

The number of children cared for in a connected persons fostering arrangement decreased slightly from 105 on 31/3/22 to 98 on 31/3/23. This figure has been relatively consistent since August 2018 having seen a swift rise between 2016 and 2018. There has, however, been a shift over the past 12 months to more connected persons assessments being initiated prior to children becoming looked after. This is a positive progression as it enables more timely decision making.

In July 2021, the initial assessments of Connected Persons (previously referred to as viability assessments) transferred to be undertaken by the Connected Persons team. Over the past 12 months the team have undertaken 220 of these assessments. Both aspects of the fostering assessment being undertaken within the same team has continued to enable greater consistency in the initial assessments and fewer negative full assessments, as where applicants are unsuitable to meet the fostering regulations they are ruled out at an earlier stage.

The work of the connected persons team continues to be a focus of the Coventry Family Valued programme. The family valued workstream has two main goals. Firstly, to enable as many children as possible entering the looked after system to be cared for by someone known to them. Secondly, to improve the support to special guardians to increase the proportion of looked after children who achieve permanence via special guardianship rather than remaining looked after.

Special Guardians and Connected persons foster carers are able to access training in an equivalent way to mainstream foster carers. The fostering service also runs a bespoke pre - approval training course for connected persons and special guardians entitled 'skills to care'. The service has also launched training for special guardians which runs 3 times a year.

## **Support to Foster Carers**

The service has continued to focus on the importance 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. This ensures that carers receive the right support at the right time to care for our children and enables placement stability.

The service produces a monthly newsletter for all foster carers and a bi-monthly newsletter specifically for connected persons carers and special guardians which include contributions from a range of professionals including colleagues in health and education.

The Annual Foster Carers' Conference took place on 22/6/22. This was held in a hybrid model with speakers and some of the team face to face, but delegates attending virtually. The theme of the conference was, "Strengthening Families" and the focus was the concept of, "it takes a village to raise a child". The various ways in which foster carers can access support to create their, "village", were considered through a keynote speech and workshops. There was a particular focus on sharing the Coventry Family Valued concepts and models with foster carers. Those attending gave overall positive feedback with exceptionally positive feedback on the keynote speech.

A number of other regular events to show appreciation and provide support for foster carers have taken place through the past year. Since December 2021 these events have also included Special Guardians alongside Connected Persons Foster Carers. In May 2022 there was an appreciation event for mainstream foster carers which included recognition for their length of service alongside special awards for foster carers who had gone above and beyond. In August 2022, there was a summer fun day for connected persons foster carers and special guardians which was well attended, enabling carers to build peer relationships. For those who have moved into special guardianship, this is also a crucial way in which they can continue to feel supported by the service. In December 2022 two winter events were held one to celebrate mainstream foster carers and the other to celebrate connected persons carers and special guardians.



The service has run a sons and daughters support group for children who live in a fostering household but aren't fostered, for example, birth children for a number of years. However, following feedback from the children, this group was made more frequent (monthly) from January 2023 and now takes place on a Saturday afternoon. The group name has altered been altered to, "my family fosters", to be more inclusive of those who are in a fostering household but not a son or daughter.

The service provides, '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 and a support group for mainstream foster carers. The service has been supporting a special guardian to set up a peer support group for special guardians and connected persons.

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 26 mentors. The mentors have so far offered support to 88 foster carers. The majority of these mentees were

newly approved mainstream foster carers; four before Fostering Panel and the rest shortly after being approved. One mentor and two mentees were Next Steps carers but since it has been agreed by the Next Steps Co-Ordinator that mentors in the scheme will mentor those joining it. Five mentees were experienced foster carers who required one-off support and were matched with mentors to support them for three to four months with particular areas of fostering – including managing particular aspects of children’s behaviour, the impact of fostering on birth children, moving children on to adopters, and dealing with an allegation. The aim is for the scheme to continue to grow and to recruit more foster carers to provide this type of support to all groups of carers including Connected Persons and to provide more bespoke support to experienced carers taking on new challenges.

The service runs an induction workshop programme for newly approved foster carers. All newly approved carers have been able to access this in order to support them into their fostering career.

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.

### **Support from the Edge of Care Service**

In November 2021, Edge of Care Services (EOC) began to work with foster carers to support placement stability. The focus of this role is to support children and young people (aged 8-17) residing in foster care where placement stability is a risk. EOC offer a whole family approach to family’s experiencing crisis and when difficulties begin to escalate. EOC know that children who have been through traumatic life events and experiences may be affected by complex needs and behaviours which can be difficult to manage. Family relationships can become stressful and tense which could trigger placements breaking down. Edge of Care Services are recommended by Team Managers and Social Workers at various meetings such as: Looked After Children’s Reviews, Team Around the Child meetings and during Stability Meetings.

Foster Placement Stability Practitioners provide a 12-week intensive support package, providing focused support when crisis arises and intervene when needed to reduce tension. The aim is to strengthen family relationships, build resilience and empower families with the skills which enable them to find their solutions in the future through a restorative lens. The purpose of this role is to support children’s permanence and stability, to prevent looked after children experiencing repeated placement breakdowns which may impact their sense of belonging and self-worth.

EOC has seen an increase in Foster Placement Stability Referrals this year. They received 21 Foster Placement Stability Referrals which includes 17 individual young people and 4 sibling referrals. 14 young people and their families have completed an intensive intervention with Edge of Care. Due to concerns regarding parenting approaches, 5 of the referred young people moved placement. This year they have also worked with 3 SGO placements. The key themes within referral have included children and young people presenting with complex and challenging behaviours linked to past trauma and abuse, attachment related needs, complex mental health, poor neurodevelopment and learning disabilities. The service works with carers who are struggling to manage the needs and experiences of children and young people in their care and where this is impacting relationships. Tools and support are provided to enable foster carers to respond to these challenges more effectively. Practitioners are developing their use of Dyadic Developmental Practice to increase their range of support for foster carers. Dyadic Developmental practice involves the child and carers working together to enable the child to gain positive relationship experience which helps them to grow and heal emotionally. Family members develop healthy patterns of relating and communicating.

Moving forward, the EOC service will continue to work with the Fostering Service to develop support. This will focus both on feedback from those who have worked with EOC and on making referrals at the best time to increase stability.



## **Training and Development of Foster Carers**

Foster carer training was provided through the Council's Organisational Development Team up to 1/4/22. On 1/4/22 this responsibility transferred to the Fostering Service and in October 2022 to the Children's Services Development Team.

In April 2022 the Fostering Service launched an online booking system for foster carers training. This enables foster carers to book training directly as well as enabling direct updates to attendees if joining instructions alter. Feedback on this system is this has been well received by carers and simplifies the process of booking in training courses. The system has also enabled training records to be entered directly onto foster carer records.

Foster carers are able to access 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 advanced attachment theory 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. There is a mixture of face to face and virtual training as foster carers have told us that this is what they would like. Foster carers can also choose to undertake some of their learning through a range of E Learning courses available. The Fostering Service contributes to monthly meetings to plan and coordinate the training offer.

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. 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 refresher every 3 years in order to keep up to date with their practice.

The service offers an 8 week group programme to carers entitled the Foundations for Attachment which is based on the dyadic development psychotherapy model (DDP).

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 are held face to face.

The service also facilitates a regular preparation training course for connected foster carers entitled "Skills to Care" and has started to offer a quarterly training course for special guardians and those considering special guardianship. The special guardianship course was drawn up in collaboration with local authority partners within the Adoption Central England partnership.

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. The service runs 2 programmes of TSD workshops for mainstream carers and connected persons carers in order to support carers with the completion of the standards.

## **The Foster Carer Association**

All Coventry approved foster carers are members of the Coventry Foster Carer Association (CFCA) although participation is voluntary. The Foster Carer Association has met monthly throughout the period of this report. The Fostering Operational Lead and Fostering Service Development Co-ordinator have attended part of the meeting on a regular basis to receive feedback and suggestions

from foster carers on issues which are important to them. The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children (Practice) also attended a meeting in October to consult directly with foster carers.

In addition to meetings, the Foster Carer Association host support groups as well as social events for foster carers and host a social media group from which foster carers can seek support directly from their peers.

Members of the Foster Carer Association regularly support events in which they present the perspective of foster carers to children’s services staff.

### **The Foster Carer Consultation and the Foster Carer Survey**

Foster Carers are regularly consulted about the work of both the Fostering Service and other changes that affect them. The following is a summary of this consultation over the 12 month period:-

Month	Development heading	Development work
April	Annual survey focus group  Attendance at CFCA (Coventry Foster Carers Association)  We asked Connected Carers what they thought of the wording ‘Viability Assessment’	Action plan was created to work with the CFCA and Fostering Service  Queries taken and worked on  We now use the word ‘Initial’ Assessments
May	Attendance at CFCA  Feedback to evaluate the Appreciation event	Queries taken and worked on; an agreement that all social workers should display their contact number on their signatures made.  This has been used to consider what went well, not so well and to understand more about how foster carers like to be appreciated
June	Meeting with Chair of CFCA  Fostering Service Conference Q & A  RISE (child and adolescent mental health service)	Mapped the priorities of foster carers across the fostering service action plan. Overarching message is to raise the profile of foster carers and be seen as professionals  took questions around the subject of the conference and other matters from foster carers  Foster carers feedback inputted into re-commissioning
July	Workshop for Social Workers with foster carers	The intention of this session was to share back to social workers some of the practical ways they can work better with carers and help raise their profiles in terms of being a professional in the child’s life

	Foster Carer Charter	We did a survey and focus group with foster carers to seek views on the charter
August	Summer event feedback  Consultation on the need for certificating training events	We sought feedback to understand more about what carers want for these events This feedback has also been used to consider what we need to do for events in 2023  68% of respondents agreed that training certificates are not needed.
September	You Said, We Did with Operational Lead  CFCA	Lunch time session to review the survey action plan  Team Manager attended to hear feedback from foster carers
October	Advice and Mediation Service consultation  Coffee van chat  CFCA  One Minute Guides	Feedback provided to inform recommissioning  Service Development Coordinator went to meet foster carers. There was lots of good constructive feedback around training and in particular first aid. As a result more courses were agreed as needed and more negotiation ongoing  Queries taken away; an agreement made in relation to cancelling visits where practitioners are over 30 minutes late due to the impact on the children waiting  The CFCA had asked for a series of One Minute Guides to be developed to help consistency of practice. A survey and focus group was held to collate topics.
November	Training and Development forum and survey  Foster Carer Charter Re-launch	The intention was to gain feedback on what is on the calendar, what works and what is most valued, as well as what we must deliver to adhere to the regulations.  A event was held to embed the principles and signatures captured to pledge to the different people who work with children in fostering families. Changed our logo to Fostering With Coventry
December	Winter events – Fostering	We sought feedback from those who attended the events and carers expressed enjoyment of the event and that it was good to have the opportunity to meet and celebrate together.

January	<p>CFCA meeting</p> <p>You Said We Did</p> <p>Consultation: Child Care and Short Breaks</p> <p>Consultation and representation: Long Term Match Support Plans</p>	<p>Attendance by operational lead and service development coordinator took away queries and gave feedback on updates This was the third lunchtime session with operational lead</p> <p>Feedback in relation to proposed update to policy. Updated policy amended in response to feedback.</p> <p>A survey was sent out asking for views on what we need to include in a Long Term Match Support Plan. A working party including a foster carer followed.</p>
February	<p>CFCA Meeting</p> <p>Mainstream and Connected Persons Carers Annual Survey 2023</p> <p>Consultation: Adoption Application for foster carers</p>	<p>Operational Lead and Service Development coordinator attended and heard feedback from foster carers.</p> <p>This year's survey included an 'in focus' section as requested by the CFCA with questions drawn up by the CFCA</p> <p>ACE Regional Adoption Agency asked for Coventry foster carers to share their views on the process and form to apply to adopt a child they currently foster. Responses were fed back to ACE</p>
March	<p>Consultation: Statement of Purpose</p> <p>Consultation: Allegations</p> <p>Corporate Parenting Board</p>	<p>We asked foster carers to share their views on the Statement of Purpose. Feedback was included in the update of the document.</p> <p>The service is reviewing how we work with foster carers subject to the allegations process. A survey was sent out in relation to this with foster carers also invited to participate in focus groups in May 2023.</p> <p>A working group was formed to undertake this piece of work. This includes a foster carer representative.</p> <p>Foster carers were invited to bring their children to the meeting to give them the opportunity to share their views. Working with one of our carers to provide an inclusive resource for the children to share their thoughts was well received and we are grateful for their input.</p>

	<p>Consultation: Saturday club for children whose family foster</p> <p>Sept 2022- 31 March 23</p>	<p>Both staff and foster carers were asked to help identify a good name for this important group. The group is now titled, "my family fosters"</p> <p>In September 2022 an anonymised feedback system was made available to foster carers to feed back to the service.</p> <p>During the year we had:</p> <p>25 feedback responses from mainstream carers 1 connected persons carer</p> <p>All feedback given was shared with Operational Lead and relevant service</p>
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In addition to the above, foster carers are regularly included in the recruitment of staff at any level in the service.

The annual foster carer survey took place for the second time in March 2023. There was an increase in the number of responses with 143 foster carers participating. Following the survey, the CFCA met to draw together feedback on what actions they would like to see. This was discussed with the Fostering Operational Lead, Strategic Lead for Looked After Children (Practice) and Strategic Lead for Looked After Children (Corporate Parenting) to form this year's survey action plan. Some quotes from the survey are below:-

*We feel fully supported by the team around us. We appreciate the time that each professional makes for both the child and our family unit, outside of our direct support we have always found the extended team to be easily approachable and understanding, we have never met a wall in terms of support."*

*My supervising social worker is the only reason I am still fostering. Out of hours support is fantastic too. Mentoring programme helped me when things were tricky. Coffee mornings are very supportive. Training is excellent.*

*Putting support in place for families that need it like the children and family workers, edge of care, stability meetings should continue. The events and training in place is really good and the support groups that are provided are a really good. The awards for the children were fantastic. The communication from the professional support service is good and the newsletter is a great addition to communication*

*The supervisory team and Our Supervising SW have always been very supportive. They always let us know they are there and don't unnecessarily contact us or add on extra work.*

### **Fostering Panel**

Over the course of the year, the Fostering Panel met on 38 occasions. This was 3 more than in the previous 12 months. This table gives a summary of the cases presented to panel over the past 12 months with the comparison to the previous 12 months.

Category	Number 2021/22	Number 2022/23



<b>Mainstream applications (Form F)</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Connected Persons applications (Form C)</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Connected Persons Extension to Regulation 24 – 16 - week temporary approval period</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Foster Home Reviews</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Foster Home Review - updates</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Foster Home Reviews – post allegation</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Long-Term matching reports</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Exemptions</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Changes of Approval</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Resignations and de-registrations</b>	<b>Connected Person 33</b>  <b>Mainstream 16</b> (including 2 partners who left the household)	<b>Connected person : 30</b>  <b>Mainstream: 17</b> (including 3 partners who left a fostering household)
<b>Updates / Notifications</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Qualifying Determinations</b>		<b>22</b>
<b>Appeals to Panel</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Referrals to the Independent Review Mechanism</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>

The overall volume of business through the Fostering Panel has remained relatively static over the last year in comparison to the previous year. There is a notable reduction in the number of extensions to temporary fostering approval being required which indicates an improvement in the ability of the service to complete full assessments within the 16 week timescale. There has been a reduction in the number of first foster carer reviews being presented which is attributable to some reviews having been presented later than scheduled in the previous 12 month period.

Whilst there has been improvement in the processes in relation to long term fostering matches, the number of these presented to the panel has decreased. This is, in part, due to many children who have been in foster care for some time now having their long term match confirmed. However, there continues to be regular review of those children awaiting a long term match in order to ensure these plans are followed up in a timely way.

It is positive that only one case was made subject to independent review (IRM) over the year. This independent review oversight upheld the recommendation and subsequent agency decision of the service.

A new Fostering Panel Chair was appointed in November 2022 following the resignation of the previous chair. Throughout the year the panel advisor and two vice chairs have remained in post. One new independent panel member and 5 new social work representatives have joined the central list. There are currently 32 panel members on the central list.

A formal survey of those who have attended panel was undertaken in February to consider whether the Panel should resume meeting face to face or using a hybrid model. The outcome was that the overwhelming majority of fostering applicants and foster carers preferred the virtual model. The overall feedback was that this enabled them to join from home which made them more comfortable. Throughout the past 12 months, however, the fostering social worker has attended panel with the fostering applicants / carers from their home. This has been well received by applicants / carers and prevents issues with ICT connectivity.

A panel training day took place in May 2022. Updates were provided on the work of the panel and changes to the fostering service. There was a session hosted by the Connected Persons Team on the particular challenges for Connected Persons Carers. The Central Translation and Interpretation Unit undertook a session on working with interpreters. This followed a request from panel members following some occasions where panel cases were heard using interpreters. Finally, there was a session hosted by the Family Valued Team on the 4 ways of being. This is a relational and restorative practice model which outlines the importance of working with people rather than doing things to them.

Following the training day, panel members requested a specific workshop on the family valued approach which took place in January 2023.

The Panel Advisor, Panel Chair or one of the vice chairs completed appraisals for all panel members between April 2022 and March 2023. The Agency Decision Maker alongside the Panel Advisor has completed the vice chairs' appraisals with the panel chair appraisal yet to be scheduled as he has not yet been in post for 12 months.

The Fostering Agency Decision Maker observed panel in March 2023. The following are extracts from the report on this observation:-

- *The regulatory framework was well followed and recommendations made were clear, evidence based and drawn effectively from the fostering national minimum standards.*
- *The panel were each warm, welcoming and personable in their interaction with applicants. There was repeated use of the applicants names and comments like, "hello again", when panel members asked a question following previous introductions. The panel chair in particular made use of his own experiences. His use of language in the case summaries was particularly relational e.g. his mum" when referring to the child in the household.*
- *Discussions with applicants followed the formal format of set questions being asked as agreed. However, the style of these was conversational with applicants. This will enable applicants to feel at ease and able to talk during panel meetings.*
- *The process for panel QA of reports was well coordinated and enabled all to share views effectively and come to a common understanding.*

- *the panel advisor interjected effectively and appropriately to give advice and draw panel members back to the key considerations*

The Panel Advisor has quarterly meetings with the primary Agency Decision Maker, Panel Chair and Vice Chairs and Panel Support Officers. This is an opportunity for the ADM to discuss any differences of views with the recommendation of panel, the Agency Decision Maker decision and the reasons behind this. It also allows for updates on issues or changes in the fostering service and to discuss and agree any necessary changes.

One of the functions of the Fostering panel is to provide feedback on the quality of practice to the service. This feedback is provided to each social worker attending the panel. The themes from this feedback are also collated on a quarterly basis and fed back to the service to support improvements to practice. This feedback is included in the children's services quality assurance framework.

### **Foster With Coventry and the Foster Carer Charter Re-launch.**



In November 2022, the fostering service changed its outward focussed brand from, “Foster for Coventry” to, “Foster with Coventry”. This enabled the message about what being a Coventry foster carer meant, to be more in line with the Family Valued approach and in line with the One Coventry vision. In essence, the service is committed to work with its foster carers as a collaborative partnership and to Foster with Coventry is to foster with the support of the whole council and wider stakeholders and supporters.

The new branding was launched alongside the re-launch of the Foster Carer Charter on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2022. Representatives from across the council and partners signed up to honour the promises in the charter which detail the ways in which foster carers are supported to care for children. The updated charter can be found here:-

[https://www.coventry.gov.uk/downloads/download/1390/foster\\_carers\\_charter\\_and\\_support\\_strategy](https://www.coventry.gov.uk/downloads/download/1390/foster_carers_charter_and_support_strategy)

### **Fostering Schemes**

The Next Steps fostering scheme was launched in May 2018 to provide intensively supported fostering placements to those children who would benefit from moving on from or preventing admission to residential care. These fostering placements provide a supportive, safe, and nurturing family environment.

Seven households overall are part of the scheme with five children being long term matched with their carers. This continues to show success in significantly improved outcomes for the children placed with Next Steps carers. Two of the households are in the process of considering a second next steps young person.

Recruitment to the scheme is ongoing both from households becoming foster carers for the first time and those transferring into the scheme from other types of fostering.

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. They are provided specialist support and ongoing training which can be tailored to the individual needs of the children they support.

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. Following difficulties, recruiting to this scheme one household joined it in July 2022 and a second in November 2022. This has provided an invaluable resource both to support children who required a placement out of office hours and for bridging arrangements where a longer term placement could not be identified immediately.

Work has been undertaken during the year to formalise support to those Coventry foster carers who provide fostering to parents and children. This work is due to conclude in August 2023.

### **Ofsted and Special Awards**



Coventry Fostering Service was inspected in June 2022 as part of the overall inspection of children's services. The inspectors described the work of the service in the following way in their report:-

*Increased use of foster carers, connected persons and special guardians means that more children remain living locally. Carers are well assessed and supported and they have access to a comprehensive training programme. This enables carers to understand and respond to children's individual needs and has led to stability of placement for most children.*

During the course of the year two special awards were given, one to the service as a whole and the other to a foster carer.

The Fostering Service was awarded the Team Excellence Award for Coventry Children's Services by the West Midlands Association of Directors of Children's Services.

A Coventry foster carer and twins who she had brought up from the age of four were awarded a Fostering Network Excellence Award and celebrated in a national ceremony.

## Service Performance

During the past twelve months, the service has continued to focus on developing and improving practice. This has included regular quality assurance activity including observation of fostering practice. The service also undertakes a service performance review on a regular basis with learning from this shared during development sessions with the teams. Alongside observations of practice and consistent supervision of social workers these measures continue to enable the service to improve its work.

In March 2023, members of the service met for a service development day to consider a range of topics including placement stability and learning from disruptions, the use of restorative language and what our messages are to prospective foster carers about the support available to Coventry foster carers.

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 and the Recruitment and Assessment Team Manager attends both regional and national fostering recruitment forums.

## Financial Impact

Internal fostering continues to be one of the most cost-effective placements for looked after children, on a unit cost basis, as well as providing quality outcomes for Coventry children. The overall placements strategy reflects this, and the fostering fees 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 2022/23 were increased by 2% and maintenance allowances by 3% from 2021/22 levels in order to recognise the impact of inflation and the rise in the cost of living and to ensure that our rates remain competitive with those of surrounding local authorities.

Additionally, in recognition of the emerging energy crisis, fostering maintenance allowances were also increased by 3% from 1/10/22, bringing forward the usual process of uplifting allowances by 6 months. Coventry was the first local authority fostering service in the Midlands to make this change. This was an interim measure; fees and allowances were reviewed in the usual way during autumn 2022 as part of the budget setting process, and the 3% increase reconciled with the annual increase for 2023/24. Foster carers who had had a child in placement at any time between 1/4/22 and 1/8/22 were also eligible for a one-off payment of £150 from the Housing Support Fund to support with increasing living costs.

	2020/21		2021/22		2022/23	
	Budget £000	Actual £000	Budget £000	Actual £000	Budget £000	Actual £000
Internal fostering team	2,976	3,100	3,234	3,403	3,515	3,763



Internal fostering fees: mainstream	6,321	5,843	6,420	6,066	6,304	6,078
Internal fostering fees: specialist	179	128	181	225	458	259
Connected person fees	1,252	1,491	1,279	1,685	1,337	1,696
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,728</b>	<b>10,562</b>	<b>11,114</b>	<b>11,379</b>	<b>11,614</b>	<b>11,796</b>

### Future Priorities for the service

- Continue Fostering Excellence Project to enable increased capacity of internal mainstream fostering
- Continue family valued work to develop connected persons foster care and support to progressing permanence through special guardianship
- Ongoing growth of the Next steps fostering scheme
- Focus on diversifying range of recruitment options for fostering applicants
- Continue to develop recruitment of carers from a range of backgrounds to more closely match the backgrounds of looked after children
- Explore reasons for drop out between enquiry, expression of interest and approval to improve conversion rate
- 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 ensure foster carers are consulted about all changes that affect their role.
- Widen mentoring offer and develop mentoring scheme for connected persons carers

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