



Children's Placement Service Annual Report

June 2021

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Service Manager: Lisa Preston

1. Introduction

Children's Placement Service (CPS) continues to be a busy service with a number of complex situations and tasks. We have continued to maintain our core of skilled and dedicated foster carers and an equally dedicated and skilled team of social workers. The combination of these two factors continues to provide excellent outcomes for our looked after children that are placed with our foster carers. There have also been some continued challenges during this period, most notably the rise in the connected carer assessments when cases are subject to the scrutiny of the court. Whilst the team continues to rise to this challenge, this can detract from the recruitment and assessment of mainstream foster carers.

The purpose of this report is to provide further context to this but also to give an overview of activity, updates to practice initiatives such as permanence forum and placement stability forum and key areas for development in the coming year, such as the review of our fee and allowance scheme.

2. Overview of Activity of CPS

Shropshire's Children's Placement Service undertake a wide range of roles to support placements for Looked after Children. The service is regulated under The Children Act 1989 & 2004; Care Standards Act 2000 and the Fostering Service Regulations 2011.

The main aim of the service is to provide a comprehensive range of foster placements with approved foster carers to meet the needs of children who are looked after by the local authority and for whom it has been identified, as part of their Care Plan, that a foster placement is required to meet their needs.

The service aims to provide foster placements that offer a safe environment for children placed and where children have the opportunity to express their wishes and feelings, where they are listened to and their views respected and where they are aware of the diversity of the community of which they are a part.

To achieve this, the service aims to recruit, assess, train, support and supervise foster carers who have the appropriate skills or experience to provide quality placements. All staff and foster carers strive to promote best practice by ensuring the service meets, and in some cases even exceed, national minimum standards.

The pool of Shropshire foster carers continues to include placements for a wide range of children and young people, from pre-adoption babies, through to the more challenging teenagers, and respite carers and placements specifically for children with disabilities called Family Based Shared Care.

The service works in partnership with foster carers, parents and other relevant agencies and professionals, to meet the educational, health, emotional, social and other assessed needs of the children placed as identified in their Care Plans, Health Care Plans, Personal Education Plans and any other relevant Children's Plans.

In addition to assessing and supporting in house mainstream foster carers, the service also assess Family and Friends connected person's foster carers. In order to do this, work is timetabled and completed within Public Law Outline timescales and court directions.

The service also assesses potential Special Guardians and produces Special Guardianship reports for Looked after Children and Non-Looked after Children. As well as deal with private fostering referrals and assessments.

Shropshire Foster Carer Association have continued to be impacted by COVID on their ability to facilitate the events that bring foster carers together. SFCA have followed relevant COVID guidance which has been a challenge as they have missed not being able to provide these services and connection for their fellow foster carers but have made the decisions based on the safety of all. However, the SFCA have continued to keep in contact virtually with the foster carers and continued with their buddy scheme.

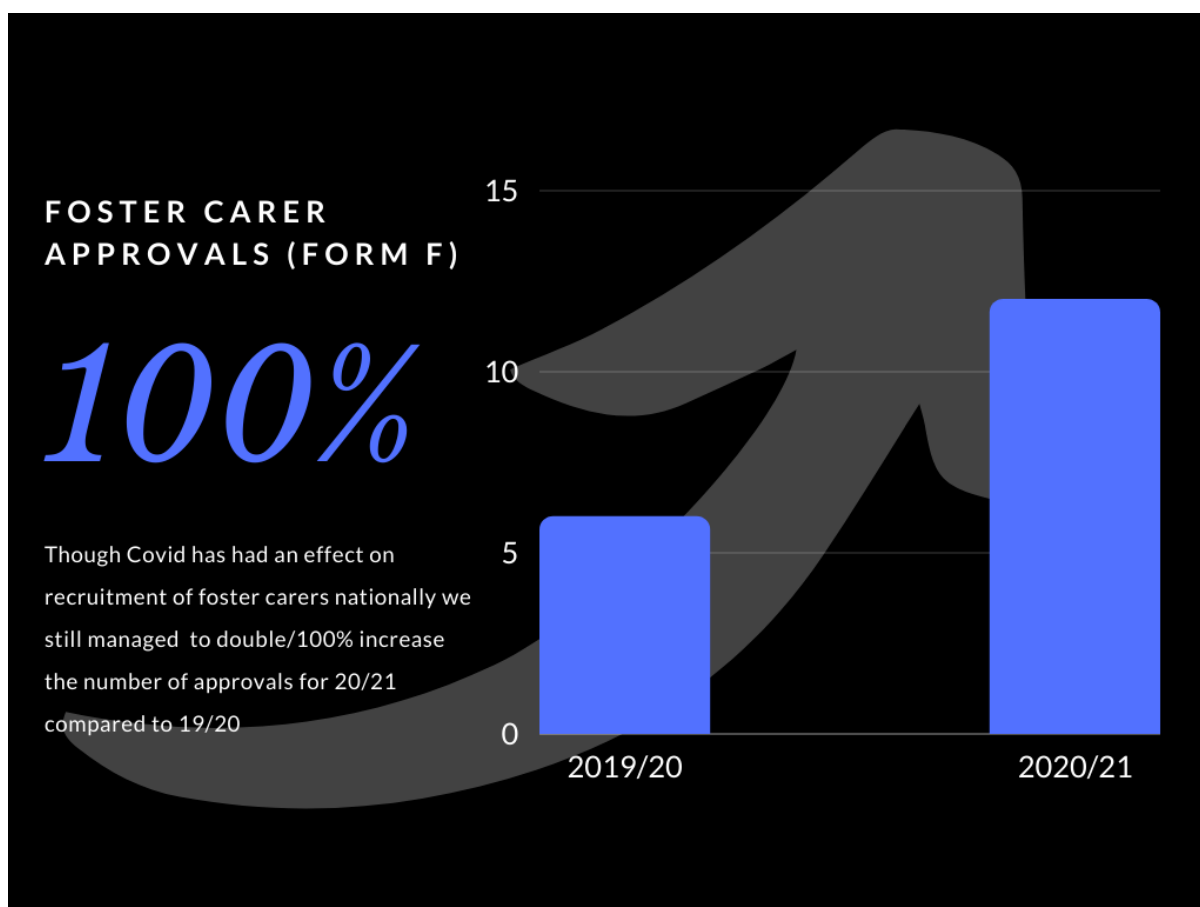
During this time the Adoption and Childrens (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 first set of amendment to offer flexibility expired on 25th September 2020. Flexibilities were extended till 30th September 2021 in regards to medical reports and virtual visits but in reality these have not offered any assistance following 25th Sept 2020.

3. In House Foster Carer assessments & Recruitment

There have been ongoing developments to the fostering recruitment process over the last 12 months. Most of these have been driven by the impact of Covid and involving finding new and innovative ways to engage with our public.

A more digital approach to information events and also recruitment in general has seen approvals increase by 100% compared to the previous year.

Our marketing & Recruitment Manger has been in post for over a year and the new digital medias have been employed, the access-points to engage with the prospective adopters and increased child specific/step down campaigns developed have now become the bedrock of our practice.

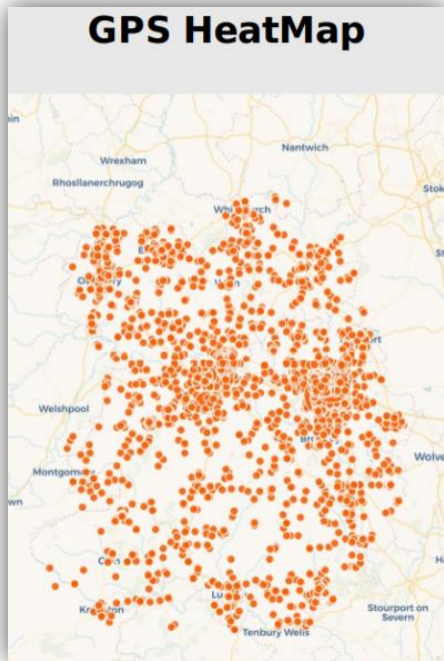


3.1 Multi point for entry

To maximise recruitment and engagement last year we introduced several points of access to start the fostering process to facilitate the historic single point of entry which had been via the Freephone Telephone line/screening call. This included launching successful monthly evening Information Session and monthly day-time coffee-shop drop-ins however in-light of the pandemic we have moved these events to a digital platform offering a virtual information event and 'drop-ins' via social media platforms.

3.2 Geographic recruitment

An initial zeitgeist heat mapping exercise of fostering enquiries 2 years ago showed perhaps an over reliance on the west and centre of the region for fostering recruitment. Over the last 12 months we have worked hard to try and maximise engagement across the whole of the region. Through including marketing techniques/coding, we now have superior data that evidences that our message is more receptive across the Shire as the map below shows. He we can see all GPS references/areas where a recent on-line campaign received a click-through.



3.3 Campaign

We continued to move away from sporadic ad-hoc marketing activity towards one centralised theme and campaign that runs for longer periods across the year.

Our main campaign #GiveMe5 was extended slightly again due to Covid but our 'Amazing carer'. Campaign launched later in the year and in place for the 2021/22 year

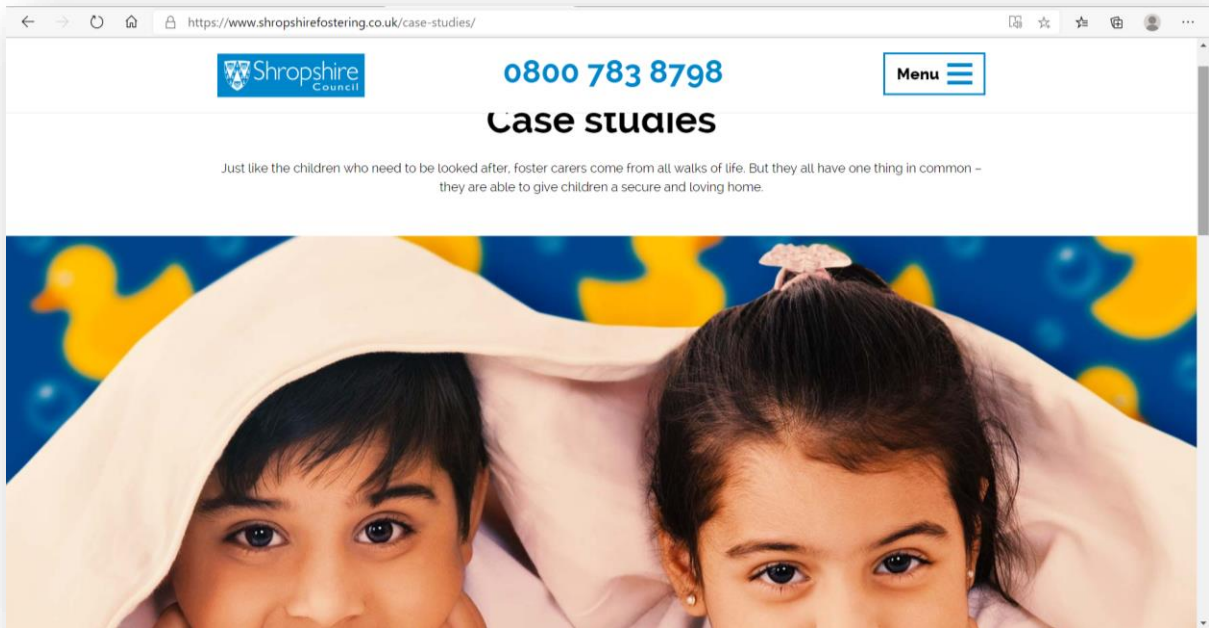
The aims around this campaign aimed to:

- Profile the positive and fun aspects of fostering
- Position of foster carers as 'doing an amazing job'
- Look to reduce the recruitment age of our foster carers by using a new/less corporate vocabulary in our adverts, type font and imagery.



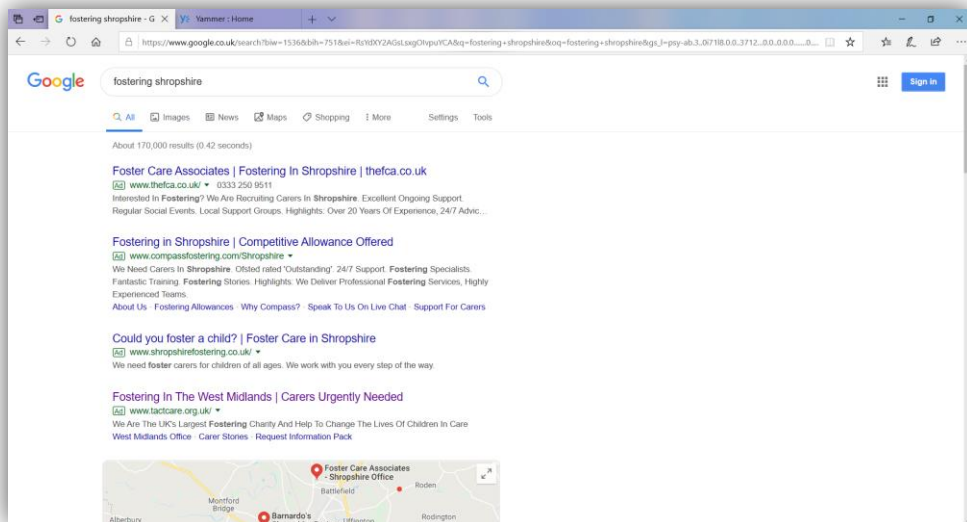
At the same time as undertaking the new campaign we rebranded Shropshire Fostering with a new logo that sits closer to that of Shropshire Council but looks to maintain an independence and vibrant pallet. The website was also overhauled in line with the new branding and new digital assets and literature created





Digital

As we mentioned, digital marketing is taking a bigger than ever role in our activity. We have maintained some pay-per-click marketing to endeavour to appear as high as possible on Google search.



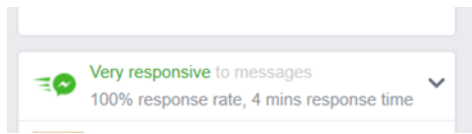
As part of this digital plan social media plays a holistic part. Twitter but more specifically Facebook has been used to really develop micro targeted communications.

Targeted adverts within the Facebook platform utilising geographic targeting, demographic targeting and behavioural targeting (as well as removing groups based on negative keywords) have been utilised. These adverts present themselves also in sister platforms such as Messenger and Instagram. There will be a mix of 'low-interest' and 'high-interest' self-populating enquiry forms, Messenger-click-throughs and also tailored sub-landing pages. This approach makes fostering recruitment more personal, more tailored and more cost effective.

In addition to the paid-for activity within social media, organic posts utilising current trends and news articles (such as Wimbledon and a pop stars supporting fostering in a music video) have been employed to deliver a key recruitment messages and delivered at time appropriate periods (i.e. Start of play at Wimbledon and during the Chart-Show).



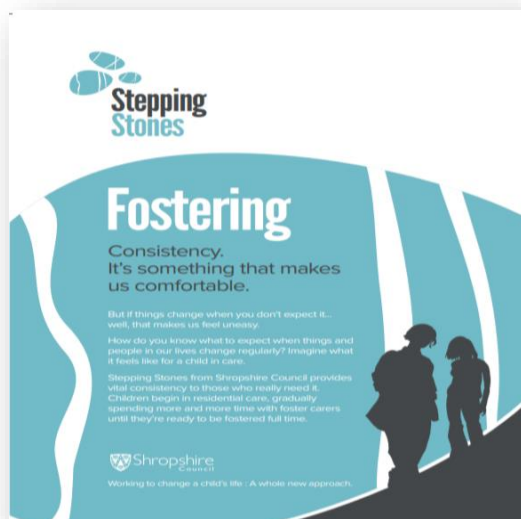
Linked with launching in social media is a need to present the organisation as responsive to messages and encourage enquiries within this app rather than necessary requesting that prospective foster carers leave this app and launch another app to enquire. Our average current response time to enquiries through this medium (regardless of time of day/evening) is just 4 minutes and we aim to maintain this within single figures.



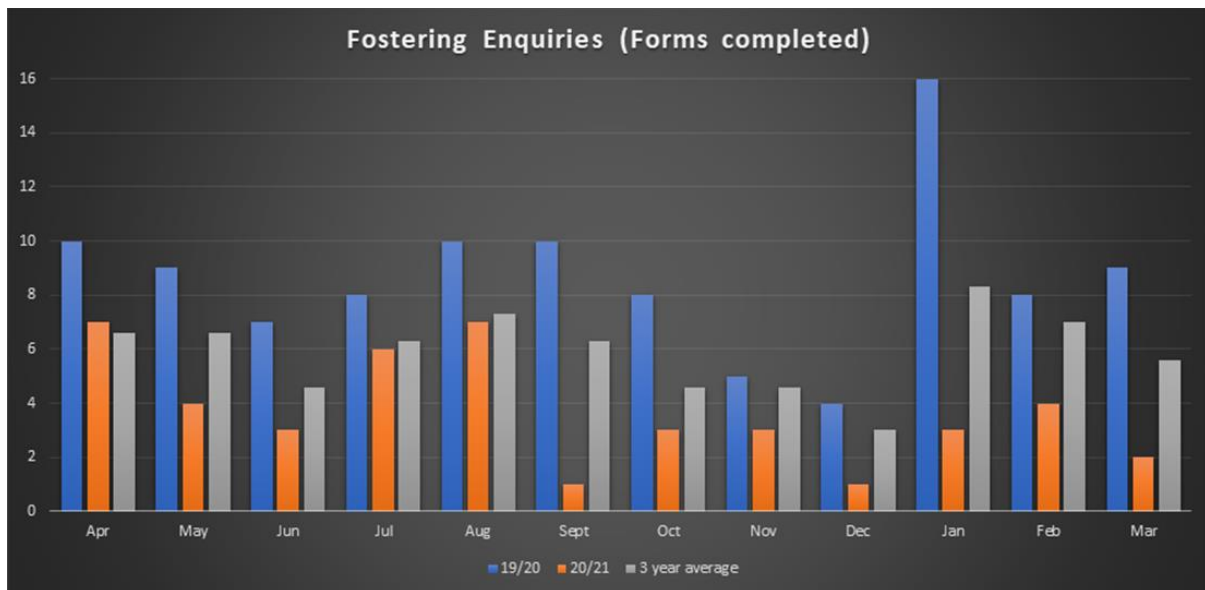
We know that digital platforms (such as Google and Facebook) priorities rich content and video. For this reason, now have a stock of short video commercials in-keeping with the current campaign objectives and recruitment message.

3.5 Specific Campaigns

SBL and Stepping-Stones has been treated separately to the key fostering marketing activity as it is easy for the specific message to become lost or swallowed by the larger fostering message.

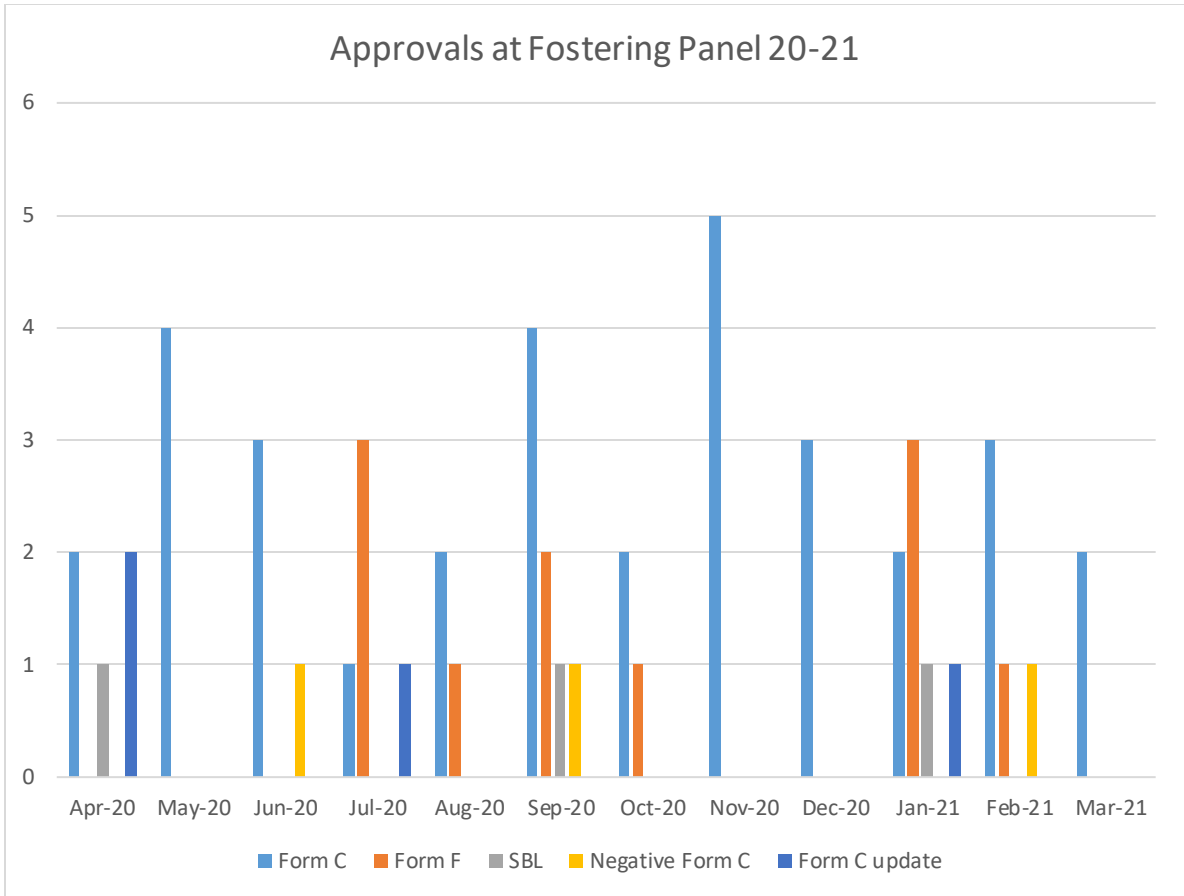


Fostering Enquiries 2020 – 2021:

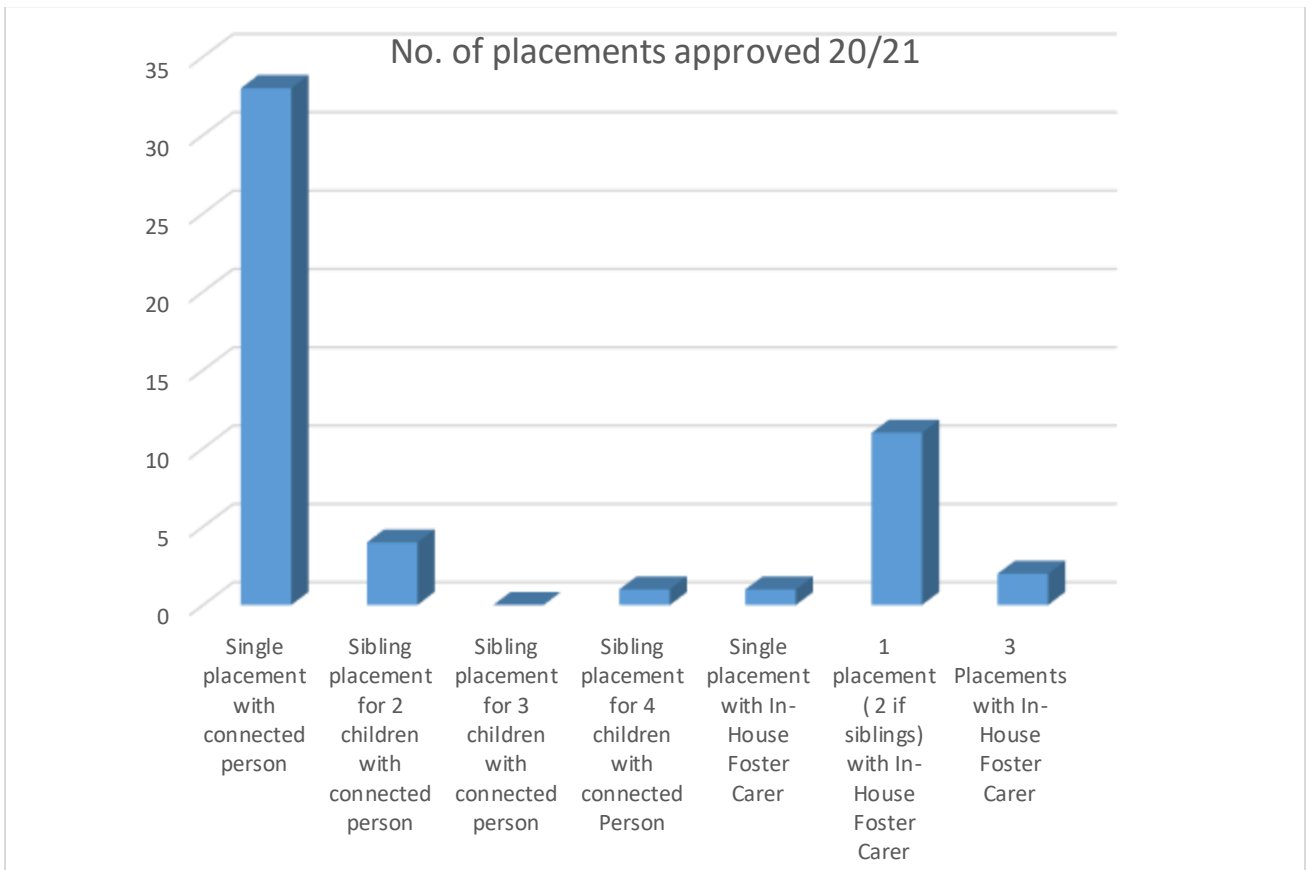


4. Approval Data

11 mainstream Foster Carer households were presented at Fostering Panel during this time compared to 36 Connected Person Foster Carer households and 4 Form C updated assessments which were also presented at panel. This demonstrates the ongoing challenge in being able to use resource to recruit and assess mainstream carers when there is such a high demand for connected person foster carers which is not reducing. The connected person foster carer assessments are often complex and within very tight court timescales and therefore it is inevitable that these are prioritised and often take up the majority of the worker's time. However, this weighting does not assist the services ability to sustain any growth in in house foster carers. The ADM for final approval is Lisa Preston Service Manager-Adoption, Fostering and Residential Services with the Sonya Miller AD acting as ADM in the absence of Lisa Preston.

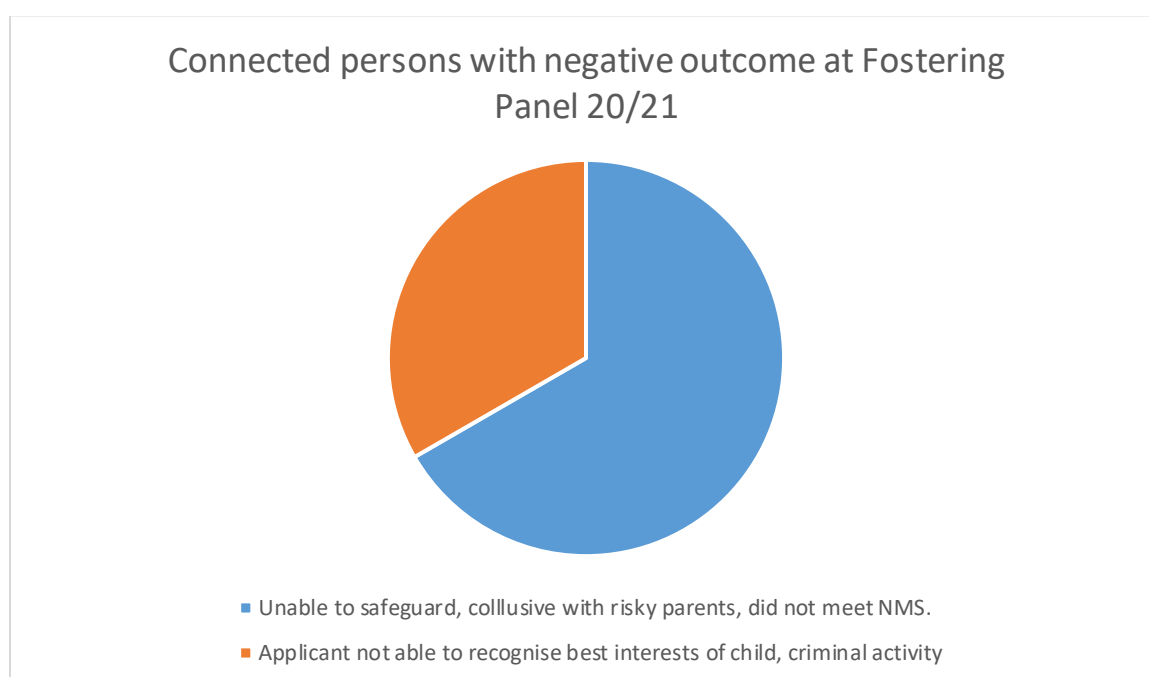


In this period the placements approved in the fostering households were:



This chart shows us the high number of looked after children that have been able to be placed within the wider family due to the assessment of connected persons. This has been in line with the children's care plans and the best interests of the children. In total 45 looked after children were able to be placed with connected person foster carers.

Negative fostering assessments are also required under regulations to be presented to panel if they have entered stage 2. In this period, we have had 3 negative outcome assessments presented to panel.



Through the recruitment process, we endeavour to meet the needs of the service and the needs of the children entering the Looked after Children's system. The needs of the children do change, and we have noticed that the needs and presentations are becoming more complex. However, there is a consistent need for carers for teenagers, sibling groups and disabled children. We alter our recruitment drives and questionnaires to meet the needs of a wide variety of children, but these key areas prioritised. We are also doing this in line with considering carers for our Stepping stones project.

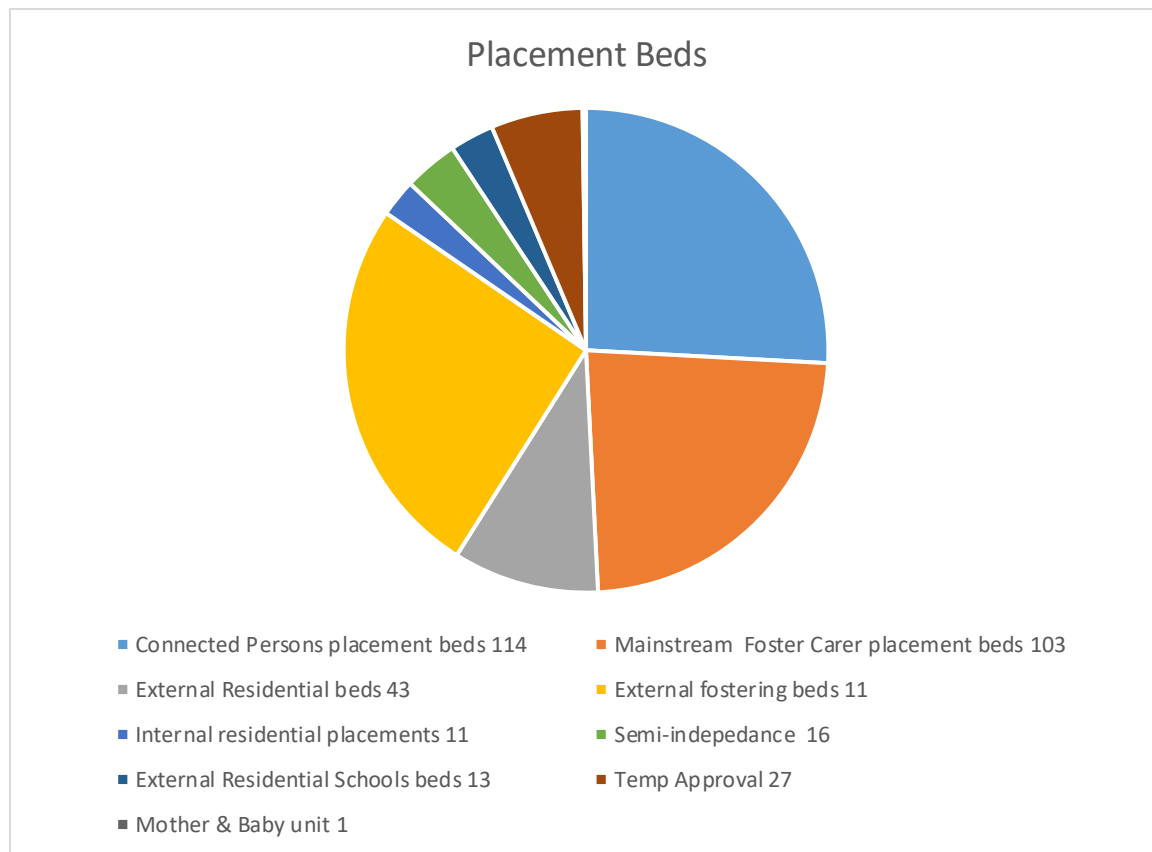
We continue to use social media to increase our reach to people considering being foster carers and have seen an increase in enquiries due to this.

Our Shropshire Foster Carer Association continues to be a driving force in Foster Care development. The SFCA would normally be running several events to facilitate carers to have social and learning opportunities however due to the COVID-19 pandemic this

has not been possible, and this has had an effect on foster carers ability to share peer support and interaction. The SFCA continue to meet regularly with the service management team to contribute to developments and advocate for the carers. The SFCA representatives will also be involved in new projects that are emerging bringing the foster carer voice to the fore.

External Residential is also used where it is not possible to place a child in internal provision. Stepping down a looked after child from residential to foster care is one of the council’s strategies for achieving stable placements and reducing overall service costs and this will continue to be worked on alongside the Stepping Stones project.

There were 160 Fostering Households on the 31st March 2021 (including in house foster carers and Connected Person foster carers). This is divided into 68 mainstream fostering households and 92 connected person households. This overall number did not include 20 connected persons foster carer households which are under Reg 24 temporary approval.



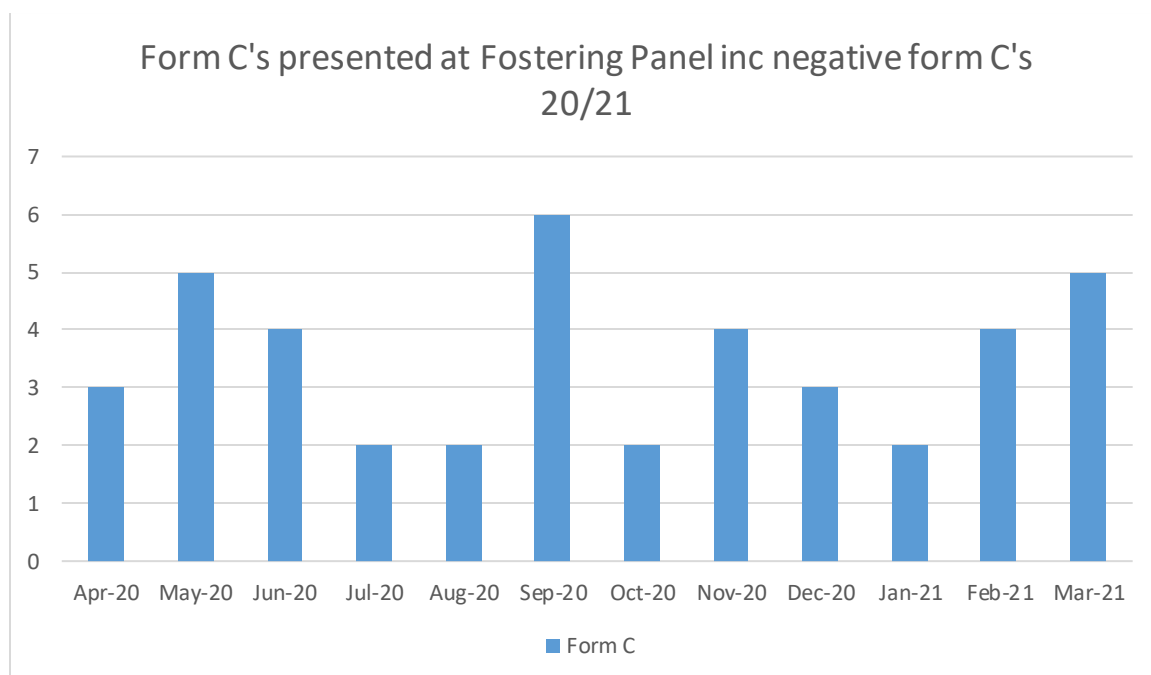
5. Connected Persons Foster Carer Assessments

Prior to the presentation of a Connected Person foster carer household to panel they need to be subject to a viability assessment to ensure that they would meet the basic requirements of fostering regulations. If this is positive, then they will proceed to the full assessment which can last from between 12 weeks to 16 weeks. During this time

a child may be placed with the applicant/s under Temporary Approval, but this cannot last beyond 16 weeks.

The chart below shows that Children's Placement Service have assessed an increasing number of Connected Person Foster Carers throughout the 2020-21 period and continue to experience a high demand for viability assessments and full assessments overall. The number of new connected carer viability requests for this period is 200 which is a 110% increase on last year's number of 95 viability referrals. There continues to be requests for viabilities and assessments for families which are located out of county and sometimes out of the country. The ability to attend to these visits has been affected by COVID restrictions and the need to keep service users and staff members safe and so the use of virtual visits via SKYPE, TEAMS and Whatsapp has been used. Please note that although Connected Persons are family or friends, they are still required to abide by fostering regulations and expectations and to be provided with a supervising social worker. Connected carers are entitled to the same level of support, including financial support as in-house foster carers.

The Regional Connected Carer protocol agreed by the local Family Justice Board members continues to be disregarded by courts. The regionally agreed connected persons protocol which specified appropriate timescales and amounts of people put forward for assessment, was signed up to by the judiciary, all six Local Authorities and CAFCASS. Despite this relaunch, there have continued to be a high number of referrals for connected carer assessments, these are often not in line with the protocol. CPS management team have continued to challenge these on a case by case basis however with a 110% increase in viability referrals it is clear that this is a growing concern.

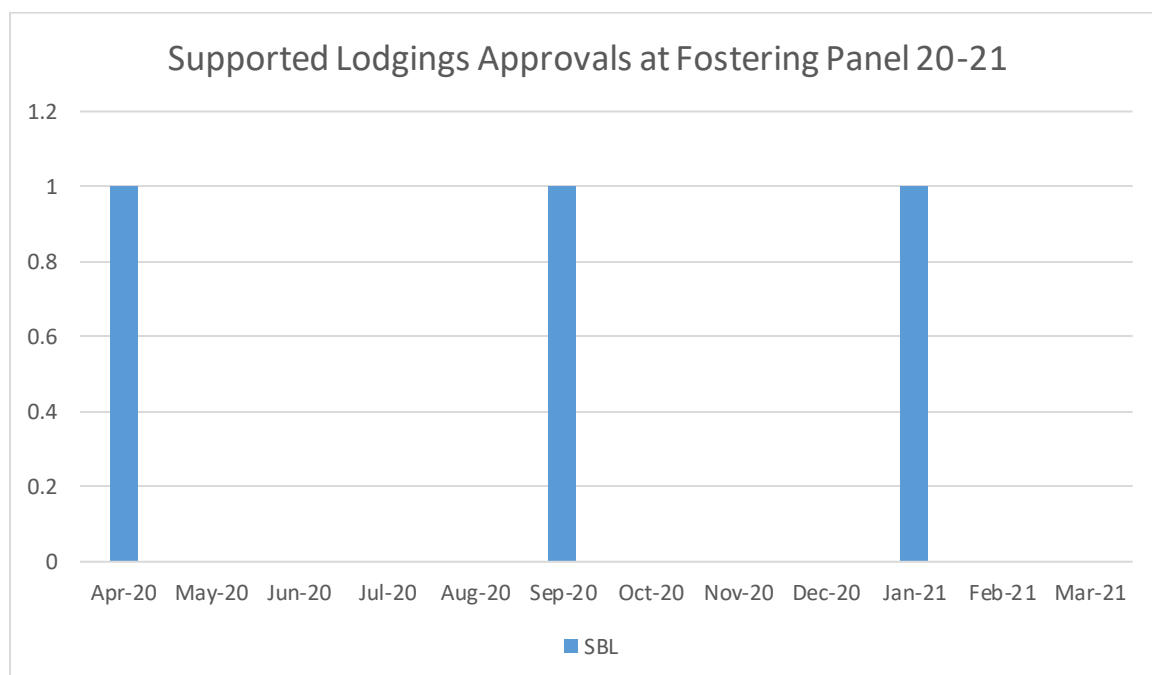


6. Supported Board and Lodgings

Supported lodgings is a nationally recognised type of provision for young people in care and leaving care aged 16+ when those children need support to live independently rather than needing full-time care. Children under age 16 cannot be placed. A large proportion of local authorities in England either provide the service in-house or commission it from the 3rd sector.

This type of provision falls outside both children's and adult's regulatory frameworks, due mainly to the emphasis on "accommodation-based support" rather than "care." It is used as a stepping stone to independence, and only ever when it's in a child's best interests. For some children, it's the right choice such as those who do not wish to live with a foster family or in a residential home. For some unaccompanied asylum-seeking children this can be the right option, but not for all.

During this period 3 households were approved at panel to become SBL providers.



This shows that we have had a lower approval of our supported lodgings providers and this is hoped to increase with an increased awareness in our marketing campaigns.

7. Staying Put:

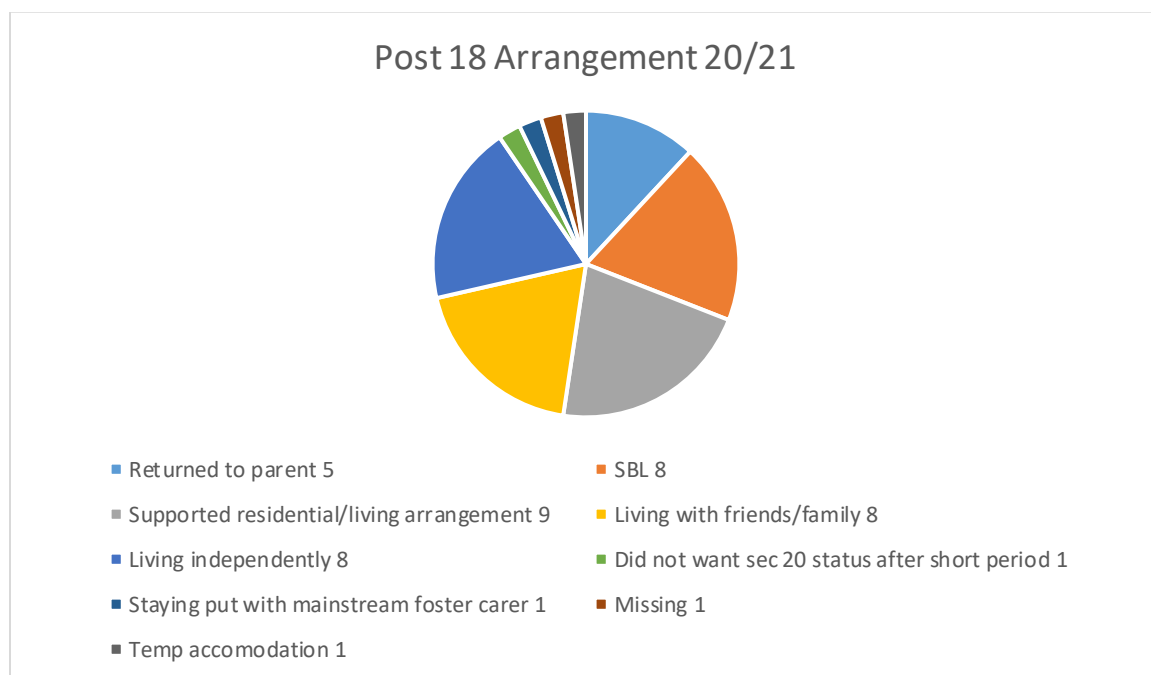
A legal duty on local authorities in England came into force on 13 May 2014, in Part 5 s23CZA5 Welfare of Children (98) of the Children and Families Act 2014.

This requires local authorities in England to facilitate, monitor and support staying put arrangements for fostered young people until they reach the age of 21, where this is what they and their foster carers want unless the local authority considers that the staying put arrangement is not consistent with the welfare of the young person.

A staying put arrangement is not the same as a foster placement. The young person staying put, who must be a former relevant child, is no longer a looked after child. They are a young adult and a care leaver. They are entitled to support as a care leaver and will be allocated a personal advisor who is part of the Leaving Care Team. The foster carer is no longer acting in the capacity of foster carer for that young adult; they are their 'former foster carer'. The foster placement becomes a 'staying put arrangement' and is not governed by fostering services regulations. The aim of Staying Put is that the care leaver will continue to receive support until ready for independence.

The 'former foster carer' offering a staying put arrangement may at the same time be offering foster placements to children who are looked after. Such placements will continue to be subject to provisions of the fostering services regulations. In this circumstance, the former relevant child will, as things stand, require a DBS check as they become a member of the fostering household over the age of 18.

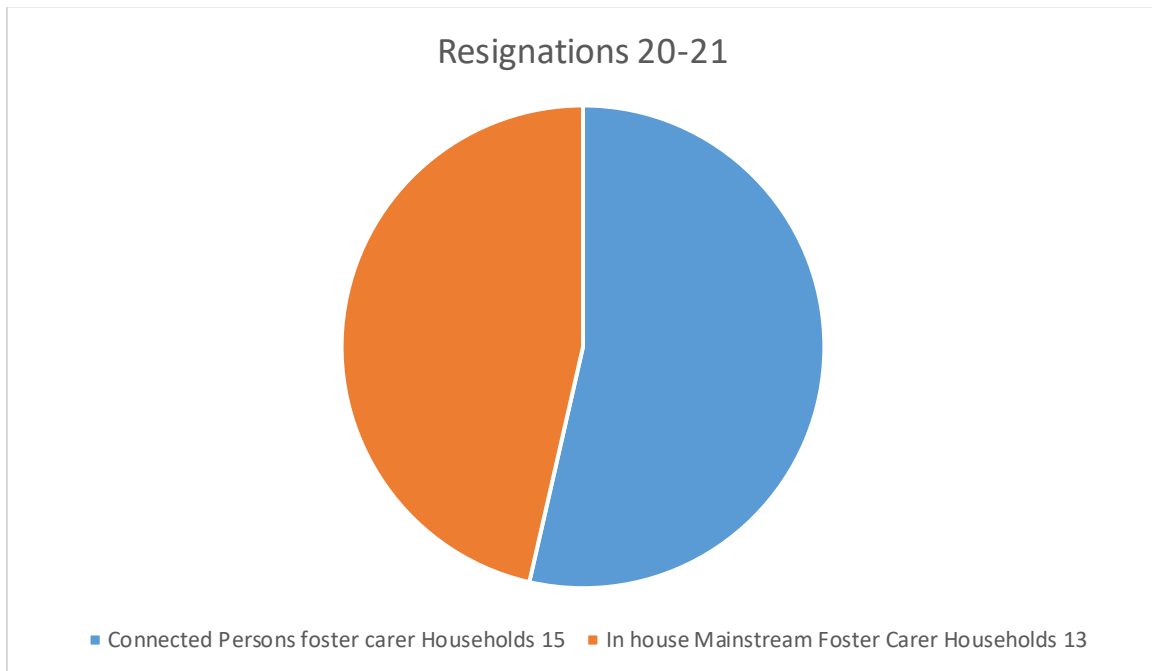
In the year 2020-2021, 42 young people who were looked after turned 18 in this period, 1 of these remained as 'staying put' with their former mainstream foster carers, however 2 remained with their connected carer foster carers under SBL.

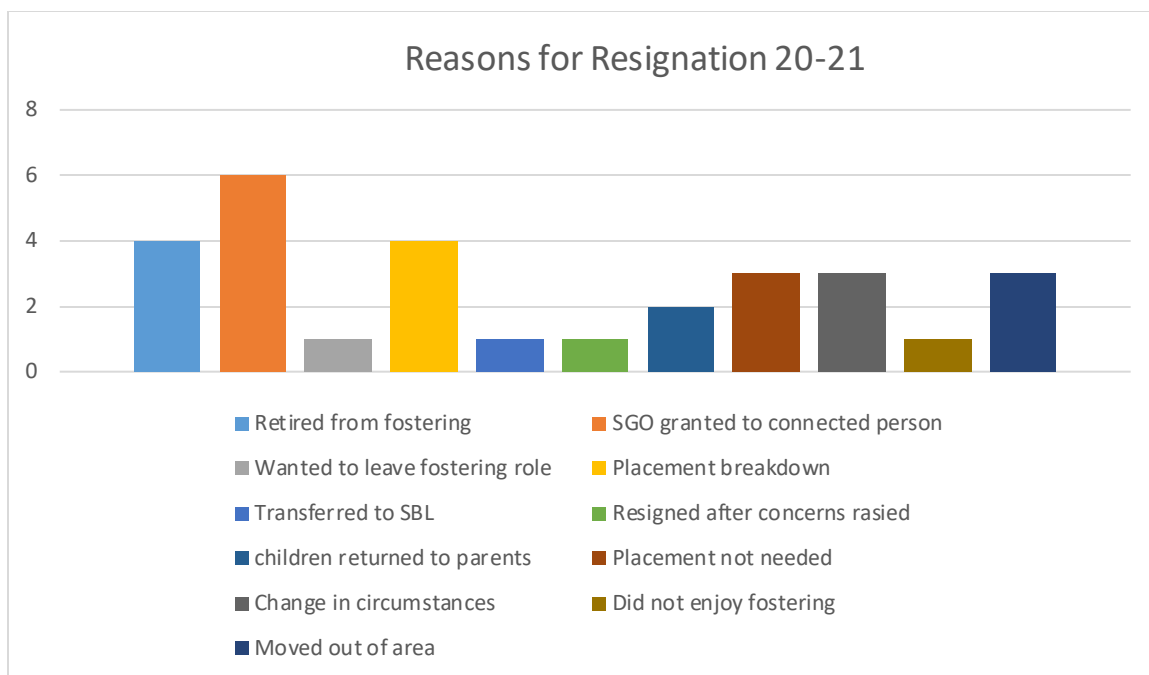


8. Resignations

Resignations from Fostering come from both In House Foster carer and Connected Person Foster carers for a variety of reasons. For some in house carers, they have decided to retire after many good years of fostering, while a minority chose to transfer to Independent Fostering Agencies. The majority of Connected Persons foster carers resign after securing a legal order such as a Special Guardianship orders which offers permanency to the child or children they are caring for if the child or children they are caring for returns home.

Between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021, we had 28 foster carer households' resignations from 15 Connected Person Households, and 13 In House Foster Carer Households.





9. Foster Carer Annual Review

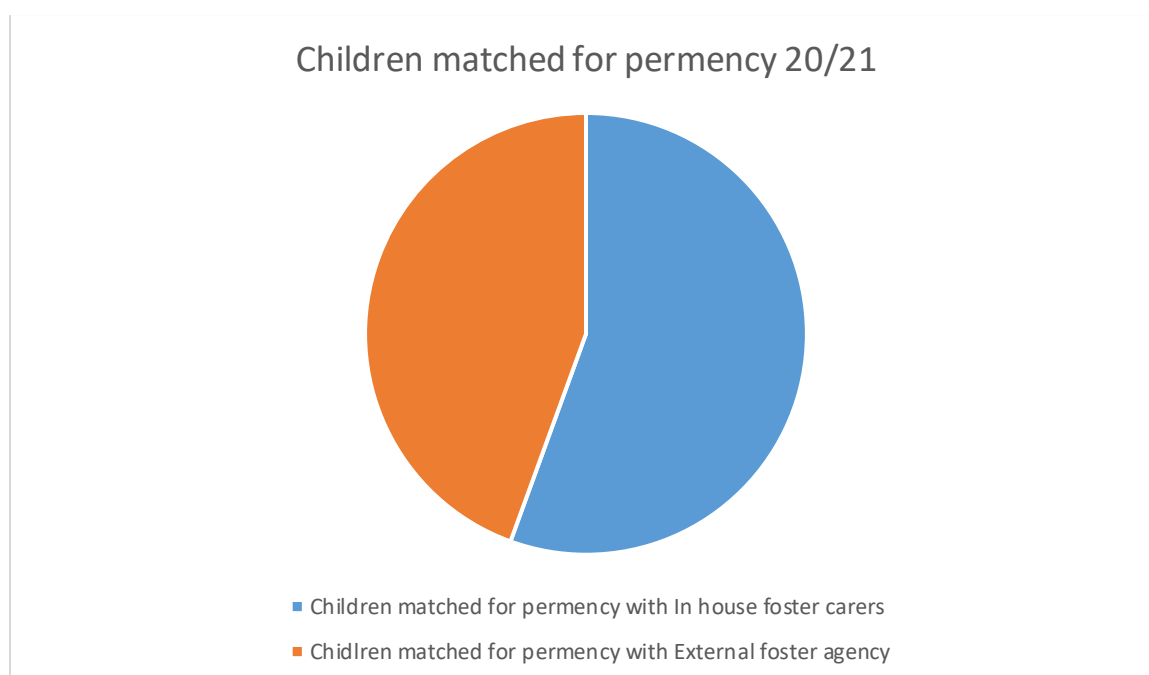
All approved fostering households are required to have an annual review of their suitability as carers within one year of their approval. Thereafter reviews should occur each 12 months or whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary or appropriate to safeguard the welfare of any child who has been placed with that carer, but at intervals of not more than a year.

Children's Placement Service undertook 109 reviews of fostering households between 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021. There have been some reviews which took place outside of timescales. The reason for this has been carers ill health, and difficulty in mutually convenient times and arranging times with carers as children have been at home more so during COVID 19. Likewise, reviews have been delayed when carers have experienced family bereavements, not wishing to meet with the service, s.47 investigations and unresolved complaints made by carers. Some reviews have been delayed due to service capacity.

The annual reviews are chaired by the Fostering Team managers, and by an experienced Independent social worker. The majority of annual reviews this year have taken place via telephone calls and virtual Teams meetings. This has been to minimise face to face meetings due to COVID 19 global pandemic.

10. Matching

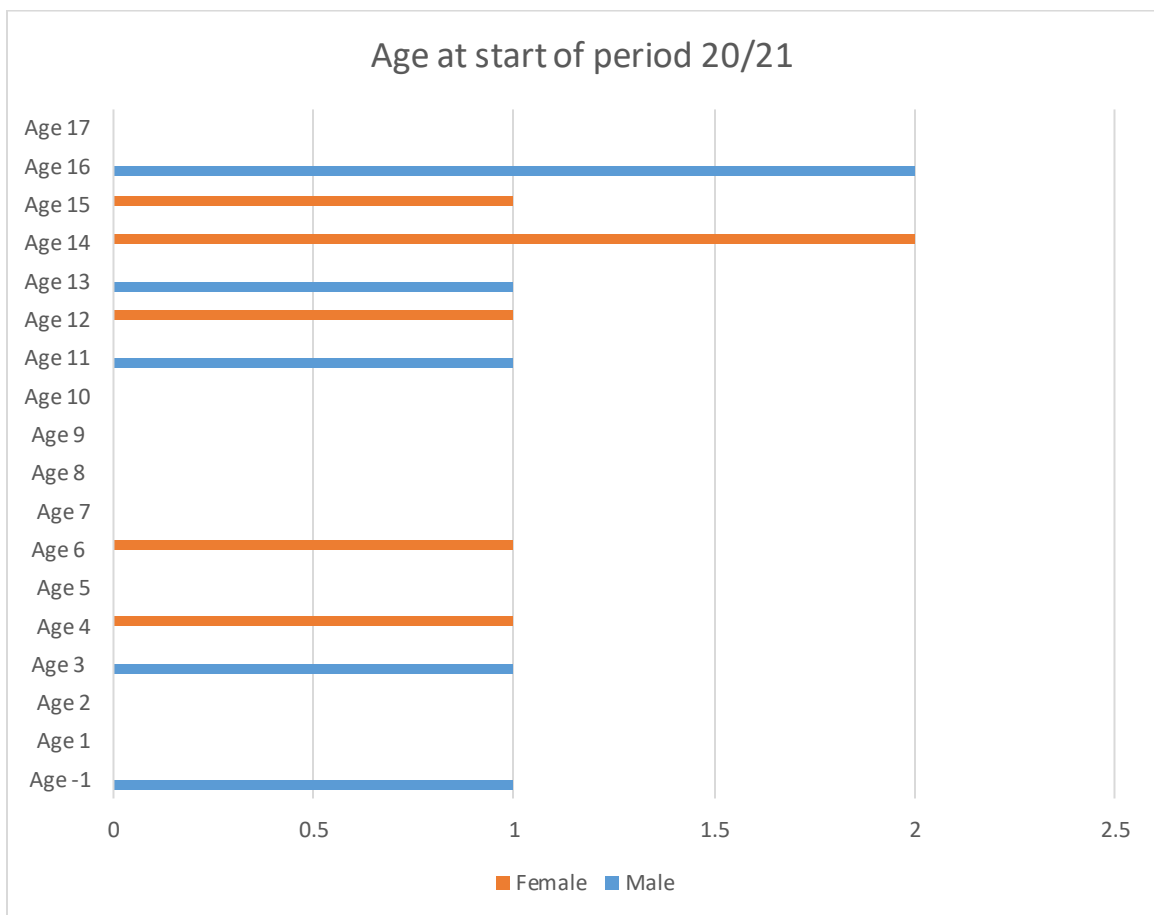
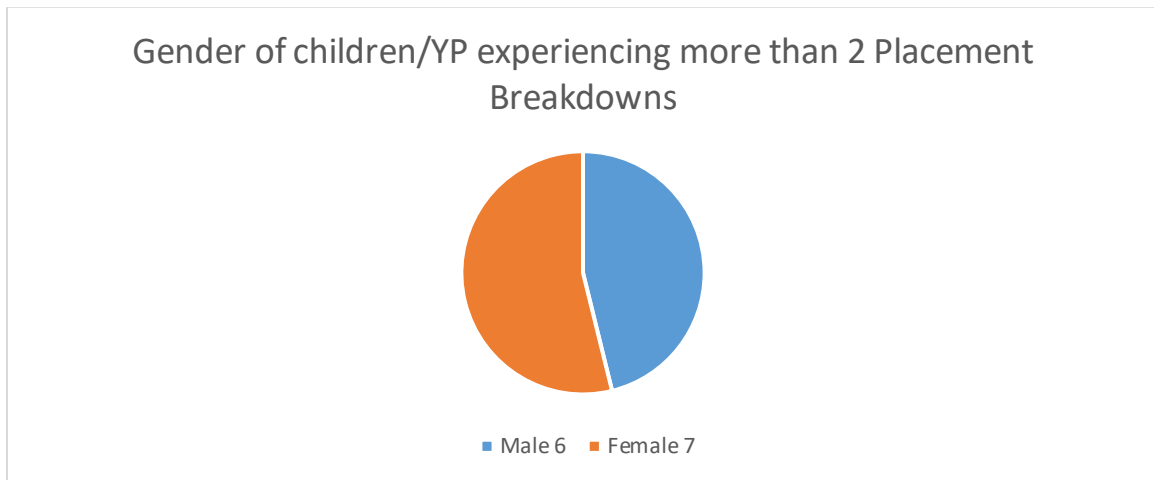
In this period there were 9 children matched with their carers. Out of these 5 children were matched with in house foster carers, and 4 children were matched with external foster carers which continues to demonstrate the commitment to the permanency of the children in local authority care which is in line with our Permanence policy and demonstrates the foster carers commitment to the children in their care.



11. Placement moves

During this period, there were 13 children who had experienced more than 2 placement moves. Children who experienced 2 placement moves may have been moved from an emergency placement to a short/long term placement, moved from a foster care placement to a family member or moved from a short-term placement to a

long term or permanence option therefore this data is only covering those children who have experienced more than 2 moves.



The data from this period does not lead us to any solid conclusions around age and placement disruption and has shown that there is little evidence that gender plays a part on placement disruption. However, after age 14 there appears to be an increase in disruption in permanence.

12. Private Fostering

Private Fostering is an arrangement made for a child under the age of 16, or under 18 if a child has a disability, to be cared for by someone other than a close relative for 28 days or more. Close relatives include brothers, sisters (whether of full blood, half blood or marriage) stepparents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

A child is not privately fostered if the person caring for him has done so for fewer than 28 days and does not intend to do so for longer than that. Privately Fostered children are not deemed to be 'looked after' and are not necessarily a child in need.

In Shropshire, we have a designated lead social worker for Private Fostering who is situated in the Children's Placement Service.

Referrals are received through the Initial Contact Team in the first instance where the receiving manager will decide, if based on known history, and any additional presenting information whether the young person may be a child in need and as such require a social work assessment of the child's needs. The case will also be allocated to a fostering social worker to undertake an assessment of the carer. If no social work assessment is required, the referral will be directly transferred to the Children's Placement Service to begin a Private Fostering report. A social worker will undertake the initial assessment visit within 7 working days. This report is then presented to Shropshire's Suitability Forum within 21 days of the notification being received

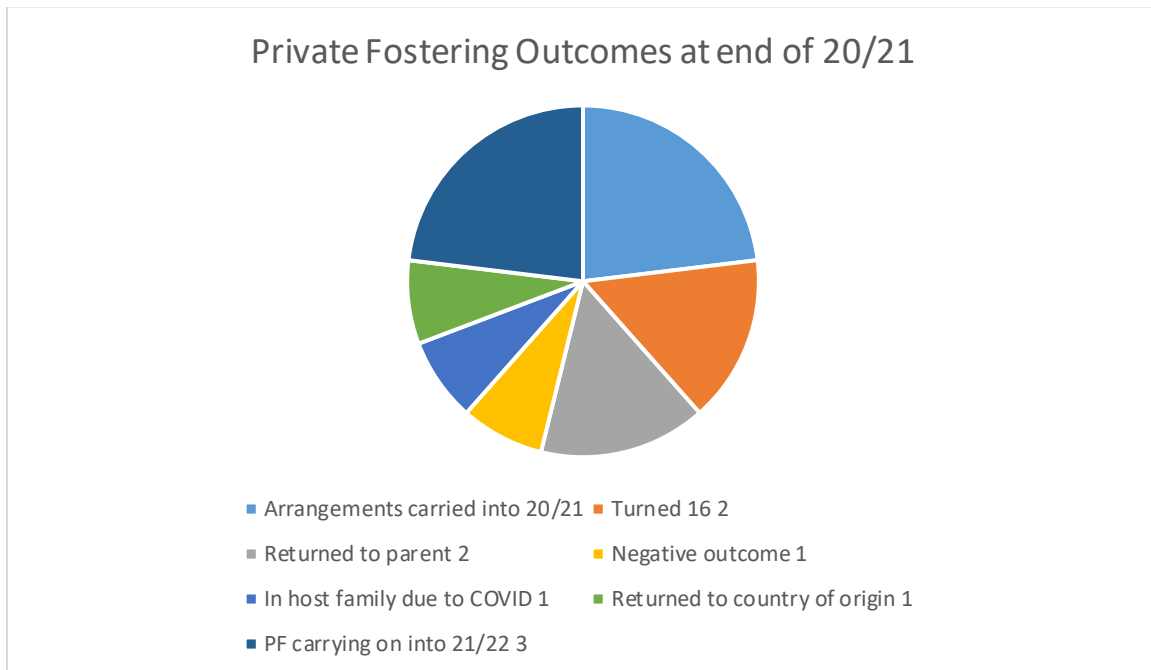
If a child is not under a Child in Need arrangement or a social work plan, then the regulation visits to the child will be carried out by a Children's Placement Service officer. These visits are every 6 weeks for the first year and every 12 weeks for the second and subsequent years. Additional visits can be requested by the child, private foster carer or parent. Any concerns raised in regard to the welfare or care of the child from these visits will be followed by in accordance with the safeguarding policies and pathways.

The suitability forum is made up of Service Managers and Team Managers from children's safeguarding service. The purpose of the forum is to note the suitability of the arrangement and consider any requirements or prohibitions.

By the 1st April 2020, there were 3 private fostering arrangements on-going from the previous year, and a further 7 new PF arrangements assessed between 1st April 2020 and the 31st of March 2021.

Out of the 7 Private Fostering arrangements assessed in 2020/2021

- 1 was a foreign language student staying with host families identified and arranged by a private independent school as the child could not return home due to COVID.
- 1 child returned to their country of origin
- 1 was assessed as a negative arrangement
- 1 child returned to birth family
- 3 new PF arrangements are ongoing into the next year.



There remains a steady flow of referrals for assessment of private fostering arrangement. Due to the onset of COVID 19 pandemic at the end of this time period the service is expecting this rate to rise.

We continue to hold regular suitability forums which enable us to have a senior management overview of the suitability of arrangements and to put in any restrictions, recommendations or prohibitions if required.

We continue to build professional relationships with agencies who are involved with placing young people from overseas with host families to ensure better and timelier notifications in order to safeguard them.

13. Special Guardianship Orders

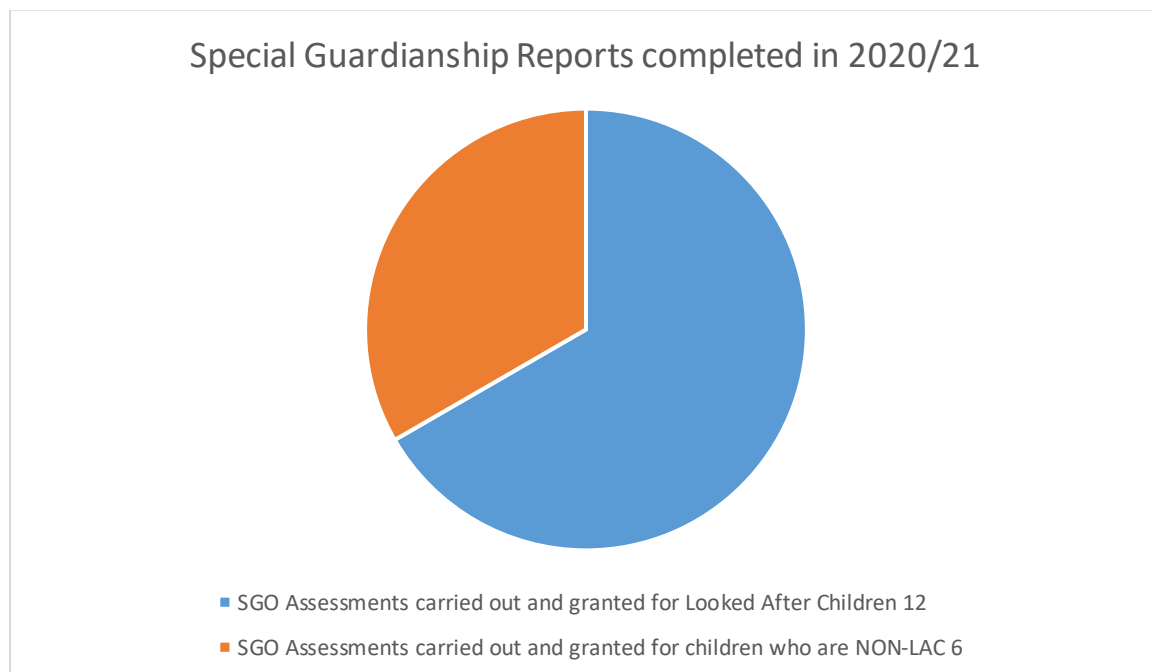
A special guardianship order is an order appointing one or more individuals to be a child's 'special guardian'. It is a private law order made under the Children Act 1989

and is intended for those children who cannot live with their birth parents and who would benefit from a legally secure placement.

The Children's Placement Service undertake, upon request, Special Guardianship reports for children who are Looked After and children who are not subject to an order. The Children's Placement Service took on this role following the merging of Telford and Wrekin and Shropshire adoption services. In addition to these, the service has noted an increase in requests for Special Guardianship reports on children who are not within the looked after system.

Post Order support is available for all Special Guardians which may include: Annual contact to offer a review of the Special Guardianship Support Plan or updated Special Guardianship Assessment of Need, advice and support, mediation, access to training and assessments for therapeutic work to be funded through the Adoption Support Fund (for children who have been previously looked after immediately prior to the order being granted) . In addition, in 2021 Shropshire Council commissioned memberships for Special Guardians and other kinship carers with 'Kinship', the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales.

Between 1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021 18 SGO's were granted and of these 12 were for children looked after.



14. Mockingbird

The service has also been involved with The Mockingbird Project with Telford and Wrekin Fostering Service and The Fostering Network. The Fostering Network's Mockingbird programme is an innovative method of delivering foster care using the Mockingbird Family Model. This is an extended family model that provides respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and training, and social activities. The programme improves the stability of fostering placements and strengthens the relationships between carers, children and young people, fostering services and birth families.



Key elements of the model

- Foster carer led advice, guidance and emotional and social peer support
- Planned and emergency sleepovers
- Formal and informal training and development opportunities
- Whole community social activities
- Support to permanence - birth family, long term placement, adoption, independence
- Support with sibling and birth family contact

Mockingbird's underpinning principles

- active child protection
- birth family viewed as partners and future support
- community-based care
- continuity of care
- cultural relevancy, identity and belonging
- foster carer support

- normalisation of care
- unconditional care

Mockingbird's impact

- Improved placement stability - reduced placement breakdown
- A network of strong and authentic relationships able to replicate the support offered by an extended family
- Improved experience of peer support
- Improved sibling contact
- Improved process and experience of respite care
- Improved skills, confidence and role satisfaction for foster carers
- Improved levels of carer retention and recruitment
- A strong, robust and resilient structure able to support children, young people and fostering families through times of crisis and transition.
- Improved experience of birth family contact
- Costs saved and costs avoided.

15. Foster carer training 2020-21

An updated support and training strategy were provided as this year's Annual foster Conference. The new Strategy includes courses which have been written and were offered from April 2020. The new courses are discussed further in the "moving forward" section.

Training and Development - Foster and Connected Carers 01.04.20-31.03.21

Training Area	Medium	
	Face-to-Face/Virtual	The Training Hub
Child Protection - Raising Awareness	125 (12 f2f)	
First Aid	123 (20 f2f)	
Family Time	57	
Safer Caring	38	

Solihull Approach - Understanding Your Child	36	
Domestic Abuse Briefing	12	
ACEs	9	
Staying Put	3	
CSE	2	
Allegations	2	
Safeguarding Now	1	
Medications	COVID restrictions	39
Internet Safety	COVID restrictions	30
Reporting and Recording	COVID restrictions	18
Nurturing Attachments	COVID restrictions	22
Black Lives Matters	COVID restrictions	20
	160	129

yellow - required

green - other areas with high participation

Pre-approval training is not included in the above figures. During 2020/21

38 connected carers completed Skills to Care training (4 did not progress) and 20 foster carers

completed Skills to Foster training (7 did not progress).

The Hub training included the three areas of mandatory training, and also two areas which have been particularly popular with carers. There are other courses on the hub which have only been completed by a small proportion of the cohort, so these have been excluded from this analysis.

In normal circumstances, when training is being delivered on a face-to-face basis, the evaluation data is inputted on to a spreadsheet and a formula gives data on the impact of the training course (increased confidence, knowledge etc.). However the nature of the virtual training means that we haven't been able to use this in the same way.

15.1 Pre-Approval

Due to the COVID pandemic only a small amount of training was able to be delivered face to face. Pre-approval training is not included in the annual training figures.

During the 2020/21 training period 38 connected carers completed Skills to Care training (4 did not progress) and 20 foster carers completed Skills to Foster training (7 did not progress).

The Hub training includes three mandatory courses: Medications, Internet Safety and Reporting and Recording. Two other courses (which are not mandatory) Nurturing Attachment and Black Lives Matter have been particularly popular with carers. Other courses available via the hub have only been completed by a small proportion of the cohort and have not been included in the analysis.

When we are able to deliver training our training on a face-to face basis evaluation data is inputted onto a spreadsheet with a formula that provides immediate data on the impact/effectiveness of the training provided. For example, it enables us to determine if attendees feel they have increased confidence, knowledge, skills and so on. However, the nature of the virtual training means that we haven't been able to use the evaluation tool in the same way.

During the Skills to Foster programme there are a range of activities and exercises that are completed during taught session(s). The training also includes home practice tasks which are set at the end of each taught session. The home practice tasks make up 40% of carers training and development standards. It is a requirement that these are completed by Foster carers within their first year of Fostering.

2020/21 saw the introduction of a 1-day Pre-Approval training course for Connected Carers.

Skills for Care has proven a success with 38 households having attended to date. Training feedback from attendees has been very positive. There has been an increase in the number of Connected Carers attending induction training courses since the commencement of the Pre-approval programme. Connected Carers course feedback has been positive and in the main they have found it to be helpful, not just in terms of content but also because they have had the opportunity to meet their peers who are going through the same process. Feedback has determined that they are more likely to attend other training and are more confident to do so.

15.2 Training and Development Standards (TDS)

For in house carers the current system in place for completion of the standards has proved to be effective. Nearly all carers have completed them within the required timescale of 18 months.

Carers who may have fallen outside of the timescale are being supported to complete the standards as soon as possible.

The programme for Connected Carers to complete their TDS incorporates the Pre-Approval training (as it does with mainstream carers). The training standards are explained to participants during the sessions so that they have a clearer understanding of the programme and the reasons why the training must be completed.

There are currently 9 households out of timescale for completion. However, it should be noted that since the introduction of Skills for Care there has been a marked increase in carers completing within the 18 months' timescale.

15.3 Induction Training

Five courses make up the carer's induction programme:

- First Aid
- Raising Awareness of Safeguarding and the Protection of Children
- Solihull Approach – Understanding Your Child
- Safer Caring
- Family Time (Contact)

It is agreed that these are the key courses to be completed during the first year of Fostering. There have been a few minor adjustments in terms of how some of the training is delivered.

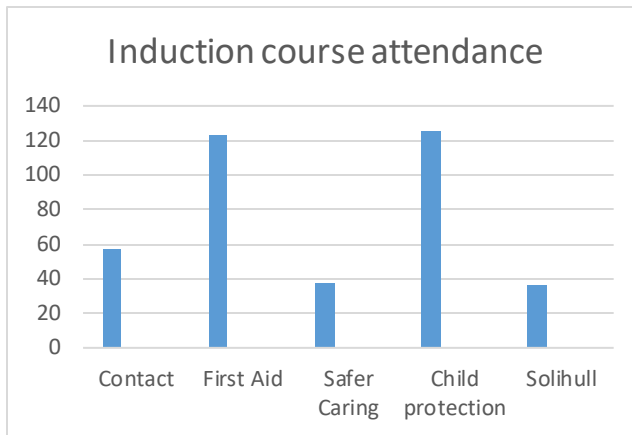
First Aid is now a 3-hour course provided by a specialist company. Since making changes to the course duration there has been an increase in attendance and completion of this training.

The frequency of Child Protection training has been increased. The training is now delivered at least once a month to ensure that we can maintain timescales not just for newly approved carers but also to ensure that renewals are kept up to date.

Evaluation feedback from this course demonstrates that Carers find it useful and informative:

“Clear and concise. Information delivered in a format that was easy to understand ... demonstrating knowledge surrounding all the subjects covered, and able to provide insights and actual examples.”

All of the induction courses have been matched to both sets of TDSs (in house and Connected Carers), in order to support the standards to be met in a timely manner.



This graph shows the number of carers who have attended each of the induction courses during this review period. At the beginning of each course carers are given an evaluation form and they are asked to rank their knowledge and understanding of the topic and their confidence of working with children around this topic prior to training. They are then asked to rank these again following the training, so we can see the difference and check that the course has improved these two areas for carers.

Data from delegate's evaluations show that for each induction course, they felt that both their knowledge and confidence around the topic had significantly increased. This shows that courses provided are not only supporting carers to gain a better knowledge, but also increasing their confidence.

The Solihull Approach training continues to be one identified by carers as having a significant impact on them, this can be seen from the comments made on evaluations such as: ***“The training met all the requirements I needed to give me a clear understanding of the Solihull Approach ... well done for arranging this.”***

15.4 Core Training

There were 9 Core training courses within the training strategy

- Loss and Bereavement
- CSE
- Responding and Dealing with Behaviour
- Attachment
- Managing Risk in Contact
- Education and SEN
- Children's Health
- Allegations

Attachment training is delivered in 2 parts, the first looks at theory and the second explores how the theoretical concepts they have learnt about can be put into practice and how this can be supported through play.

15.5 New Courses

This period has seen the introduction of new course programmes.

- Solihull Trauma.
- Safeguarding (Exploitation and County Lines)
- Life Story

- Self-Harm
- Working with Transgender Young People.

Each of the above courses have been delivered twice so far. Feedback has been positive, and they will continue to be part of the training strategy moving forward.

15.6 Additional learning opportunities

In July 2021 we returned to face to face training. To date the following programmes have been delivered to foster carers/connected persons:

Skills to Foster
Family Time
Allegations Training

a. COVID -19

Following the March 2020 conference all Face to face training was postponed until further notice due to the COVID 19 Pandemic. This resulted in increased additional planning and utilisation of different training/learning approaches to ensure that we could continue to support all Foster Carers in the best way possible on their learning journey.

Training was prioritised as follows;

- Pre-Approval Training
- 6 sessions of the Skills to Foster programme
- Skills for Care course.

These courses were (during periods of constraints) delivered virtually. Worksheets and knowledge check quizzes were developed for each training programme. These documents were sent out to the carers undergoing assessment. The completed work was returned to the Development Officer to mark/check. There was also regular phone contact with the Development Officer at specific agreed points during their completion of sessions. This was done to ensure understanding and check in with individuals on how the training was going.

b. Moving Forward

Following the COVID pandemic the team have had to develop and create new innovative ways of delivering and manage training. It is anticipated that this new way of working will be ongoing. Since July 2021 we have commenced delivery of some face to face training and take up of places has been positive.

The Training Hub will continue to offer online training covering such topics as:

- Medications
- Internet Safety
- Reporting and Recording

16. Payment for Skills

Shropshire operates a Payment for Skills Scheme for the fostering service whereby foster carers receive additional skills allowances according to their assessed level of competence, knowledge and experience. The agenda for the supervision of foster carers will address the possible progress of the foster carer under the scheme and each foster carer's annual review will take account of this. Payment for skills also applies to connected person foster carers. A new Payment for Skills document was implemented in the 1st March 2020.

The document outlines the scheme for payment to foster carers offering family-based care to children and young people looked after by Shropshire Council.

The arrangements outlined in the document represent a continued commitment by the Council to family-based care and a real attempt to recognise the skills and expertise of carers and reward them accordingly. It is also an attempt to reinforce the fair and transparent payment structure. This is coupled with the Council's commitment to continue to pay foster carers children's allowance payments which are higher than the Department for Education recommended rates and in line with regional partners, and payment for skills which are designed to both recruit new carers and retain existing carers by offering competitive payment amounts.

This scheme affords carers the status they deserve by introducing a process whereby their expertise can be measured, but also raises the profile of family-based care in Shropshire and therefore renders us more effective in carer retention and recruitment.

The scheme is only available to foster carers approved by, and registered with, Shropshire Council. It is designed to recognise the range of skills and experience that carers and prospective carers possess, as well as the time and commitment involved in caring for children who are looked after by this Council.

More importantly, by constantly striving to increase the skill base of all our foster carers we should see a consequent improvement in placement stability leading to better outcomes for Shropshire's looked after children.

There are 3 levels of payment for skills, all of which involve payment of a fee in addition to the child allowance. Child allowances are only payable if there are children in placement.

Care plus payments, which are fee payments are a higher rate of pay which will only be used in accordance with the criteria contained in the policy. This is paid alongside child allowance payments.

This policy was created with the assistance of the Shropshire Foster Carer Association and through the consultancy process with all Shropshire foster carers.

17. Participation

Between April 2020 – March 2021 the in-person group work was on hold due to COVID restrictions. Work with young people continued outdoors on a 1:1 basis and Wendy Stockton Targeted Youth Worker spent hours walking with young people. Although the weather wasn't always the best the young people were happy to have the opportunity to be outside for a short period, many having had little social contact with anyone outside of the family during the lockdowns.

CiCC Members (Children in Care Council) were invited to attend virtual social group meetings; although there was little uptake, 3 young people attended the meetings on a regular basis and found this to be a good form of support; they also completed a 12 week training course to become Peer Supporters.

Throughout the year CiCC members and potential new members were regularly updated on what was happening, information was also sent to carers. The Youth Music/Hive Project was put on hold until earlier this year when young people were invited to a virtual music making workshop, 4 young people attended.

Recruitment for new CiCC members started in Spring 2021 with the plan being that when summer arrives there will be introductions by the Peer Supporters 1:1 or in small groups for walks and chat.

There are plans in place for the summer for a face to face catch up between Peer Supporters and new members at the Hive to listen to the Podcast made by the 2019/20 group followed by indoor activities. Other activities planned for the summer are face to face outdoor activities and games, a BBQ to be organised by the Leaving Care Team and a workshop tester session at the Hive and Strawberry recording studio.

The hope is to re-start the Monthly Saturday Social Group Meetings in the Autumn when the community room in Shrewsbury is open again.

17. Permanency

Permanency Forum has been up and running since April 2018. Permanency Forums have been established to support social workers in their permanence planning for children.

All children need a secure, safe and loving home in which to be cared for through their childhood. They need to be able to develop and maintain secure attachments in order to thrive and to be enabled to have opportunities and life-long links and a network of support that will last through to adulthood.

Planning for permanence needs to be a feature of all our interventions with children we work with, in order to avoid delay and ensure all options are considered.

We have a duty to ensure the welfare of the child is paramount, and also to work in partnership with children and their parents, taking account of their wishes and feelings.

Impact for children

Permanence planning is well embedded in practice in Shropshire and is effective in preventing delay. Planning for our children who are unable to live safely with their parents is progressed speedily and where there are delays, the reasons for this are known.

Permanency forum has enabled senior managers to have oversight of both permanence decisions and the progression of care plans.

The number of children on care orders who are placed at home with parents remains a focus of attention. There are a number of children who need to progress and an appropriate plan in place for this.

Social workers are clear where there are parallel plans in place that avoid undue delay. The presence of managers for adoption and fostering and the SGO support worker is invaluable in supporting social workers through the different pathways to permanence and enables themes to be picked up.

The presence of the Senior IRO enables the link to be maintained with IRO oversight of plans.

The Permanency Co-ordinator is able to meet with individual social workers and their managers where any drift or delay has been identified to assist in putting plans back on track. This may be through advice or 'hands on' support to family find for children who are not yet in their permanent placement, or to complete CPRs or Together or Apart assessments.

Action plan:

- Continue to reduce the number of children who could safely have their care orders discharged who are placed at home with parents. Permanency Coordinator to

get firm dates from SWs for draft statements with legal and then QA timescales. Ongoing at this time.

- Permanency Co-Ordinator to liaise with the IRO lead for SGO's Nikki Watton and the TM's for timetabling in deadlines for the SGO's that need to be prioritised for completion.
- Filter all other connected carers to see who is coming up to 12 months post-placement and check no other drift-bring to the next tracker meeting. Completed.
- Children in residential care to be reviewed through Permanency Forum to see if their needs can be met in a foster placement. Ongoing at this time.
- Permanency Coordinator to ensure that permanency actions and recommendations are recorded clearly on children's case records prior to the 2nd Review. Completed.

There are quarterly permanence reports available with data and figures.

19. Conclusion

The Childrens Placement Service continues to retain a skilled and dedicated cohort of In-House Foster Carers, who like all, have had to deal with the pressures both practically and emotionally of COVID. We have also managed to maintain a stable workforce despite increasing demand on workers. Unfortunately, we continue to have a full-time worker on long term sick leave and workers who have been subject to self-isolating and shielding due to COVID which has restricted their ability to carry out all the tasks necessary. This has led to the need to use agency workers. We continue to have growing numbers of viabilities with a 100% increase and a growing number of connected persons assessments which prevent the service being able to concentrate on recruitment of mainstream carers.

With the continuing high numbers of connected persons assessments this can also lead to a requirement of a high level of placement support, which the support worker, targeted youth worker and carer intervention specialist support with. If a connected family are not able or willing to proceed to permanence through SGO then this support has to continue for a number of years. We continue to offer a good training package to our new and existing carers, and feedback on this is positive.

20. Our priorities in the coming year will be:

Team

- To retain settled teams and explore areas for growth in resource to meet the significant demands.

- To review the resource available to understand the impact on both Recruitment & Assessment and Support & Development teams of a rise in foster carer numbers.
- To maintain the physical safety and emotional welfare of the staff during and post COVID.

In House Fostering

- To continue to increase the amount of Foster Carers to meet demand.
- To review our use of social media-based technology to develop our marketing strategies.
- To encourage, where appropriate, families to seek permanence through SGO with the appropriate support.

Permanence

- To continue to make full use of the permanency tracker and permanency coordinator, and permanency forum to promote permanency for all of our looked after children in a timely fashion.

Foster Carers

- To ensure that all foster carers, including connected persons foster carers are completing TSD's within the allotted time frame
- To continue to encourage and enable foster carers to participate in and see the importance of attending training to develop their knowledge and skills to support the children in their care.
- To ensure that carers are supported through the COVID period and the period of readjustment that will follow.
- To encourage foster carers to be ambitious for their fostering career and recognise the difference they can make to the lives of all children from 0- 18 years.

21. Shropshire Foster Panel Chair 2020/21 Comments:

The year has again been largely a very positive period. Panel has 18 members, 7 of whom are Independent, including the Chair and they bring a diverse range of skills and experience. 5 members have left during the year and have been replaced with new members who reflect our objective to improve and widen the diversity of our Fostering Panel. We continue to

look for more Panel Members to widen further the diversity of our membership.

Due to increasing workload and complexity of some cases presented and the continued impact of Covid 19 Panel has met twice per month throughout the year and the outlook for the coming year indicates this pattern continuing.

We have again heard a good range of Applications, Reviews and more complex negative assessments and brief reports.

By far the greatest number of Applications have again continued to be for Connected Carers and the details of these are presented clearly within the body of the Annual Report.

Overall, the Annual Report describes another very positive year, with many challenges. The Conclusions, Areas going well, Areas of challenge and Areas for development, summarise very well the work and results of the year and detail some objectives and actions for the coming year.

We have introduced regular monthly catch up meetings between the Panel Chair and Panel Advisor, to look at current trend's areas for development and any areas of concern.

The Quality of Assessments presented to Panel have again been good and continue to improve. Panel continues to challenge Assessments, whilst never losing sight of the often very difficult circumstances that require the best possible outcome for children and Foster Carers.

Feedback form Applicants attending Panel has been positive. As Chair I endeavour to obtain verbal feedback, before Applicants leave each meeting, as it is still difficult to receive completed Feedback Forms. It is always helpful to receive this feedback to learn from and particularly listen to Applicants perceptions of their panel experience.

I am very pleased to Chair a caring, strong and challenging Panel that takes a pride in looking for Positive Outcomes for the young Persons entrusted to the care of our Local Authority.

I am similarly pleased to have the support of a very professional team within our Fostering Service.

Everyone connected with our Fostering Panel, Panel Members, Social Workers, Panel Advisor, Panel co-ordinator, Admin and Business Support Services and Team Managers/ ADM, play a vital part in being an effective

Team who work tirelessly to achieve the results and outcomes that are described within this Annual Report.

Thank you all.

Mike Roughan MBE

Independent Chair

Shropshire Fostering Panel

