

## Isle of Wight Annual Report Fostering Service April 2019 – March 2020

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an update on The Isle of Wight Council's fostering service in line with fostering services statutory regulations and guidance.

During 2019/2020 the service successfully recruited and approved 9 new fostering households.

At the end of March 2020 there were 132 registered foster carers in the isle of Wight constituting 85 fostering households.

The Fostering Service has a marketing strategy for 2020/2021; with a target to recruit 15 fostering households.

#### **1. Marketing**

- 1.1 We continue to increase our visibility across the island. We have increased awareness of our service among healthcare professionals and GP surgeries, participated in several community events for example, the Christmas tree festival, and conferences and job fairs that enabled us to meet with and promote fostering to external stakeholders.
- 1.2 We have begun to ensure our marketing is focused on fostering rather than fostering and adoption. Our web address and marketing merchandise has had the word 'Adoption' removed. Radio scripts have gone live with themes that include "we are foster carers and "I choose to foster because".
- 1.3 There have been high levels of activity across all platforms enabled the Service to increase visibility and drive awareness. These platforms included: event, digital, print, radio and public relations.
- 1.4 IW Fostering continued to roll out new branding across all communication channels and points of contact. The branded fleet vehicles arrived in January followed by new exhibit materials in April.
- 1.5 Digital activity included investments in paid advertising on Facebook to improve reach, Search engine optimisation to drive web traffic and display advertising on web browsers to boost visibility.

- 1.6 We have begun to focus on a good service to our own foster carers in order to retain them and encourage them to do well. This also benefits us in terms of reputation both internally and externally which we have then used in our marketing messages.

## **2. The Fostering Service**

- 2.1 The Isle of Wight fostering service is comprised of the following:
- 1 Team Manager
  - 1 Assistant Team Manager
  - 1 Senior Practitioner
  - 6.59 FTE Social Workers
  - 3.59 Fostering Practitioners
  - 2 FTE Administrators.
- 2.2 The team work generically and cover all aspects of the fostering tasks from recruitment through to supporting approved carers both general and connected.
- 2.3 During 2019/20 a new service Manager was appointed to cover children in care on the island which comprises of the fostering and adoption teams, children in care, care leavers and Beaulieu House.
- 2.4 The service manager has worked with the fostering and adoption teams on restructuring the teams to make one permanence team focusing on both fostering and adoption work alongside the work of Adopt South. This team has a higher number of social workers to complete the assessment and support functions in fostering and adoption. The new team will be operational from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020.
- 2.5 The focus of the new team is to improve service delivery by increasing communication, streamlining the organisation ensuring there is a focus on caseloads and time management to increase efficiency.
- 2.6 This restructure will facilitate a reduction in management, administration and practitioners' roles. This will enable the employment of additional social workers to increase the case holding capacity within the team. The team will be formed of three distinct hubs who will each focus on one activity. Recruitment and Assessment, support to foster carers or Adoption. This will enable specialisms within each area of work and to enable a more focused approach to timescales, compliance and quality assurance.

- 2.7 There is a need to continue to develop the service in order to increase the placement choice; in particular to meet the demands for older children and those with more complex needs. There is currently an impact carer level but these carers are not always able to take those children needing placements.
- 2.8 The fostering service is currently being reviewed in terms of payments, recruitment and training to ensure that we are doing all that we can to develop and improve the confidence of carers to maintain and offer placements to more complex children. This is being done alongside Hampshire colleagues as part of the modernising placements initiative.

### **3. Recruitment of foster carers**

- 3.1 In 2019/20 IW Fostering attended a variety of community events from summer festivals to school fetes and village shows. Drop-ins were trailed at a range of new venues with consideration to accessibility and convenience for attendees; These included Highstreet pop ups and coffee shop stands. Fostering Fortnight saw the team travel Island wide, with drop-ins in all main town centres.
- 3.2 The team kept tally of 109 event interactions where prospective applicants expressed an interest in the service and engaged in informed discussion. Overall there were 27 initial enquiries linked to event activity.
- 3.3 Over the year IW Fostering's Facebook following grew by just 4%, despite a 42% rise in social media advert impressions. (Impressions refer to the frequency ads were shown.)
- 3.4 The average ad position in browser search results was 1.3. Ad positions between 1.0 and 2.0 are considered good as they generally appear within the first three listings at the top of the page. This gave the service a significant competitive advantage against agency providers who advertised in the area.
- 3.5 Recruitment Data for 2019/20
- Number of enquiries 79
  - Number of Initial Home Visits 50
  - Number of assessments initiated 15
  - Number of approvals 2

- Conversion rate from enquiry to approval 2.5%
- 3.6 There is a bigger drop off from IHV to assessment than would be expected but the biggest loss is throughout the assessment period (indicating that either the wrong people are being assessed or prospective foster carers are lost during the assessment period). The overall conversion rate is very low (a 10% conversion rate is usually expected based on fostering network reported averages). One of the reasons for the restructure to enable some social workers to focus solely on assessing prospective carers and moving them through the stages in a considered and timely manner.

#### **4. Fostering support**

- 4.1 It has been an aim of the service to ensure that we have foster carers available to meet the needs of Isle of Wight children.
- 4.2 The fostering team continued to provide support and supervision to all approved foster carers and carers who remain caring for children under staying put. We continued to provide numerous support groups including monthly lunch and learn/ lite bite sessions, connected carers group, men's group.
- 4.3 Training is provided to all prospective and existing foster carers which includes Skills to Foster, Fostering Changes, Attachment, Safeguarding/ Safer Caring and Supervised Contact etc.
- 4.4 From 16<sup>th</sup> March all groups were suspended due to the corona virus and the government request to comply to socially distance, no group activities and socially isolate if suspect symptoms. The fostering team continued to offer regular telephone supervision and support and face to face supervision if requested and appropriately risk assessed. An extensive range of e-learning continued to be available.
- 4.5 The annual foster carer survey of August 2019 was sent out to 92 fostering households and provided the following results:
- 4.6 22 Foster Carers (23%) responded to the survey, compared to 146 responses last year.
- 4.7 This is a decrease of 89%, showing that audience engagement is significantly lower than previous years. In 2020/21 the service will be sent the survey electronically, to increase convenience and accessibility.

- 4.8 Throughout the survey respondents have expressed that they wish to feel more valued. The service can make Foster Carers feel valued by communicating better and more frequently.
- 4.9 In response the service is developing its foster carers Facebook page for instant communications, emails and newsletters to ensure communication is provided in a variety of formats to meet the individual carers need.
- 4.10 Improving the provision of benefits is also a direct form of reward. The Marketing Officer is working with legal bodies from Council Procurement Teams, to create a Foster Family benefit card. The concept of the card is to work in partnership with Island business who are 'proud to support IW Fostering'. Their support will be pledged through deals and discounts on the products and services they provide – all of which will be on offer to Foster Families.
- 4.11 Many respondents wish to be better financially compensated for their role. The service is not currently able to introduce a wage; however, allowances are reviewed yearly to maintain a competitive position among IFAs and mainland Authorities.
- 4.12 Foster Carers recall the assessment process to be 'drawn out'. Timescales are often driven by checks and references that are undertaken externally.
- 4.13 There are two parts to the general fostering assessment – part 1 where we gather initial checks and references. When the department receive several of these checks, we start the main assessment process, we aim to complete the assessment within 5 months. Currently the fostering team hold a mixed case load and it can be a challenge to prioritise assessment work. The restructure will enable dedicated assessment social workers to focus on timescales and to streamline processes to reduce any delay within assessments.
- 4.14 Carers felt that changes in social work staff impacted negatively on placements and that the placement planning meeting could feel rushed. Each foster carer is allocated a supervising social worker who have input into the matching of children to foster carers. The supervising social worker will ensure that the Personal development plan provides carers with training to support caring for the child.
- 4.15 The team manager of fostering will have discussions with the child care team managers who will be reminded of the importance of sharing all information with foster carers and promptness of placement planning meetings. In addition, with the new structure there will be a support hub which will work with carers and focus solely on the support to carers and children

- 4.16 62% of Foster Carers say that they have experienced a child leave their care. 36% of whom, felt that they were able to support the child during this time and in turn felt supported by the Team.
- 4.17 Respondents who did not feel supported during their end of placement said that Social workers were 'inconsistent', not everyone had been fully briefed on the case - and at times the Foster Carers were 'made to feel a failure'
- 4.18 End of placement reports and disruption meetings will be called when a placement ends. The Child's Social Worker, the child and the foster carer will be requested to write an end of placement report which will identify the strengths and weaknesses of the placement. This information will be used to improve practice and service delivery and provide a better understanding of reasons behind a change of placement. We will aim to provide stability for our foster cares by providing a long term allocated worker. The new structure will facilitate this and enable a specific focus on this important area of practice.
- 4.19 IOW Fostering will continue to offer a variety of training, including guest speakers, peer led discussions, group programmes and online platforms. Supervising Social Workers will help to identify new training opportunities that will support the Carer's Personal development record. Any specific requirements can be discussed and commissioned with approval from the Team Manager and Service manager. This may include one to one training from home. Training will be provided week-days, weekends and evenings to facilitate attendance.
- 4.20 Improving the Service. The main themes.
- Foster Carers want better communication and information sharing.
  - Supervising Social Workers to be more visible, particularly at Light Bite sessions.
  - Foster Carers want to see improvements to allowances.
  - Dissolve 'them and us' attitude between fostering and Children In Care.
- 4.21 The fostering service and the child in care service will hold regular joint meetings and when required complete joint visits to the fostering household. Supervising social workers and Child Care Social Workers will be invited to attend all light bite sessions.
- 4.22 The service manager and Team manager will have held and will continue to hold question and answer sessions which will provide the opportunity for all foster carer to provide their views, foster carers have wanted to discuss fostering allowances, Out of Hours Service and discussion on communication/information sharing.

## **5. Fostering Panel**

- 5.1 The service has 12 fostering panels that are held once each month. Each panel will hear a maximum of 5 cases. The panel chairs received an appraisal in 19/20 .
- 5.2 Panel feedback from applicants is routinely sought, however limited feedback is received. We are currently working on an electronic feedback form to encourage a greater take up to support panel development and practice.
- 5.3 The Service Manager and the Team Manager meet with the panel chair on a quarterly basis to discuss any themes in panel, issues and training and development needs.
- 5.4 The focus for next year is to hold an IOW training day for panel members to explore thresholds and practice to develop an action plan.

## **6. Statistics**

- 6.1 The Isle of Wight Council as of the 31/03/2020 has 85 registered Foster Carers (including staying put and supported lodgings and connected carers being assessed with children in placement) households who are supervised by the Fostering Team. This is an 8.4% decrease from the previous year.
- 6.2 There are a further 4 households in assessment with children already in placement.
- 6.3 These households can be broken down into their different registrations identified below:

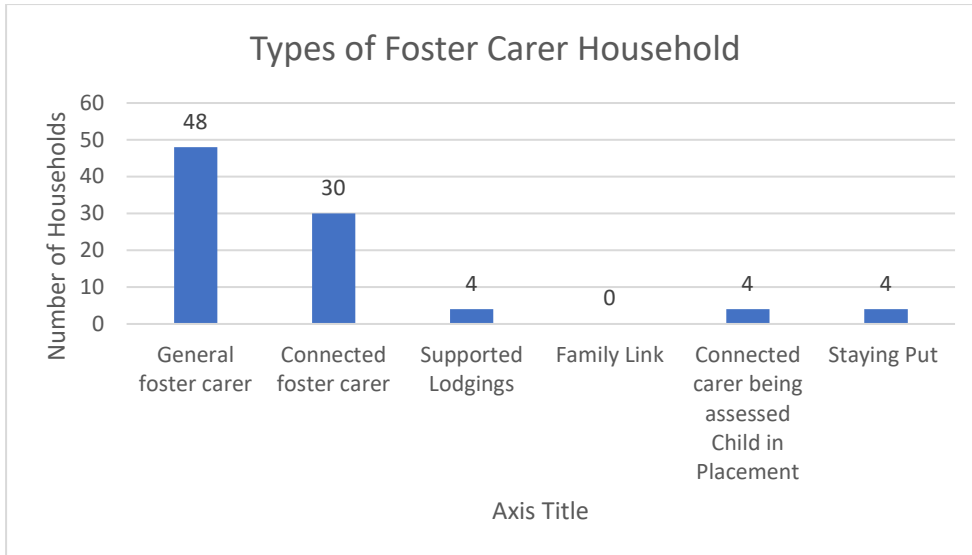


Chart 1

- i) *Data Source: Data Provided by Isle of Wight Fostering Service.*
- ii) *Date Period: Snapshot as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020.*

6.4 Challenges for the team are the timely return of application forms which is impacting on the timeliness of checks and references being requested. This is particular concern for connected carers with children placed as these are usually within the court arena.

6.5 A further challenge for the team remains sections 4 and 5 of the assessment being completed in a timely manner by the children’s social workers. This will be addressed jointly with the child in Care Team Manager and the Permanence team manager.

6.6 Foster carers on hold.

The average number of foster carer households on hold at the end of the year is 8 households. This is 9.4% of the available households. These have been for a variety of reasons, including foster carers choosing to take a break, other family or work commitments, identified for long term placements and 1 due to complaint or allegation.

6.7 Timeliness of household reviews



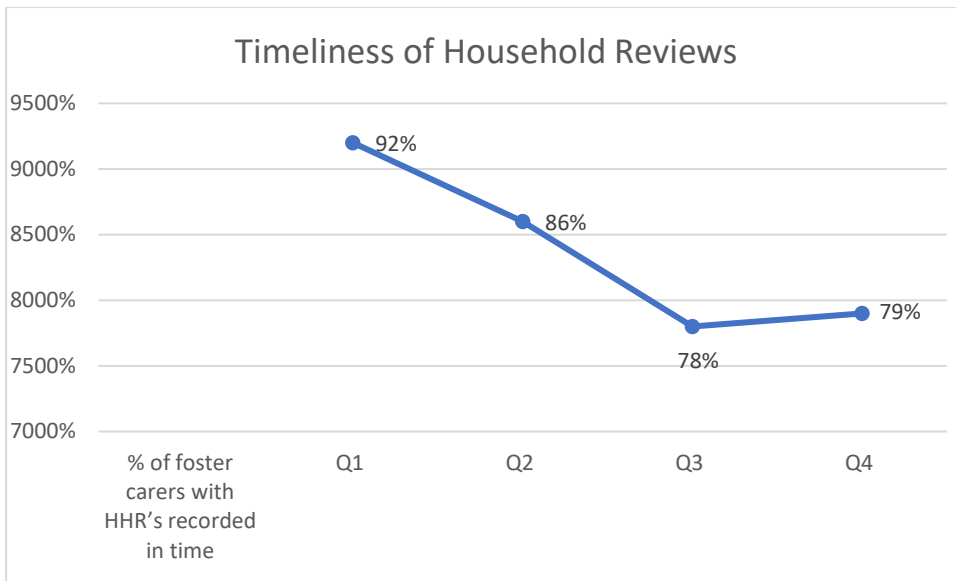


Chart 2

6.8 There was a gradual decrease in the number of foster carer households with a timely household review over the year, this was impacted by medium to longer term sickness absence within the team particularly in Q3. These staff have now returned to work and this will be addressed further by the implementation of a specific support hub to focus on this area to improve performance. The average performance was 86%

6.9 Timeliness of supervision visits

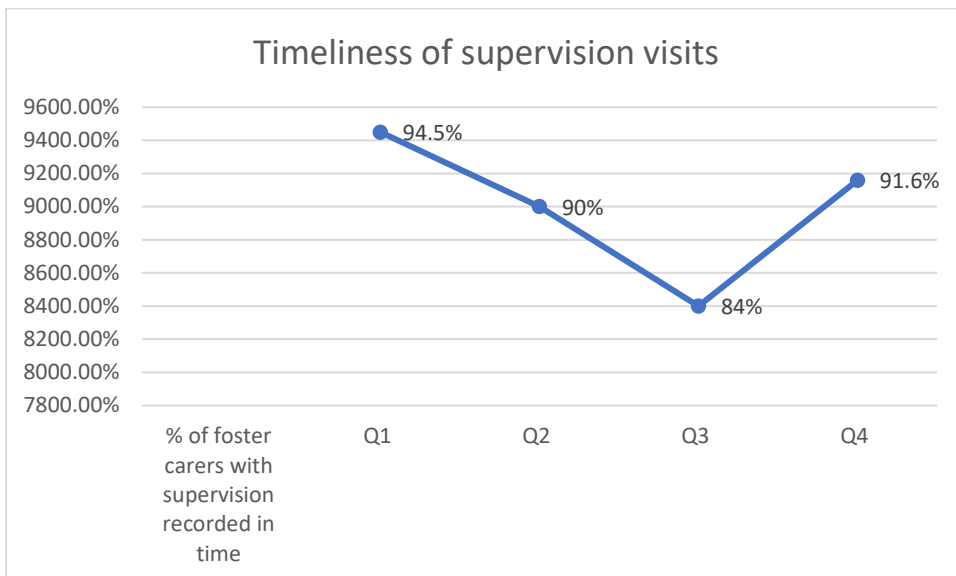


Chart 3

6.10 This is a good area of performance and evidences that the supervision of foster carers has remained a high priority despite the team's attendance issues particularly in Q3. This is an area that will be further enhanced and benefit from a dedicated support hub. The year average was 90.3%

6.11 Timeliness of unannounced visits

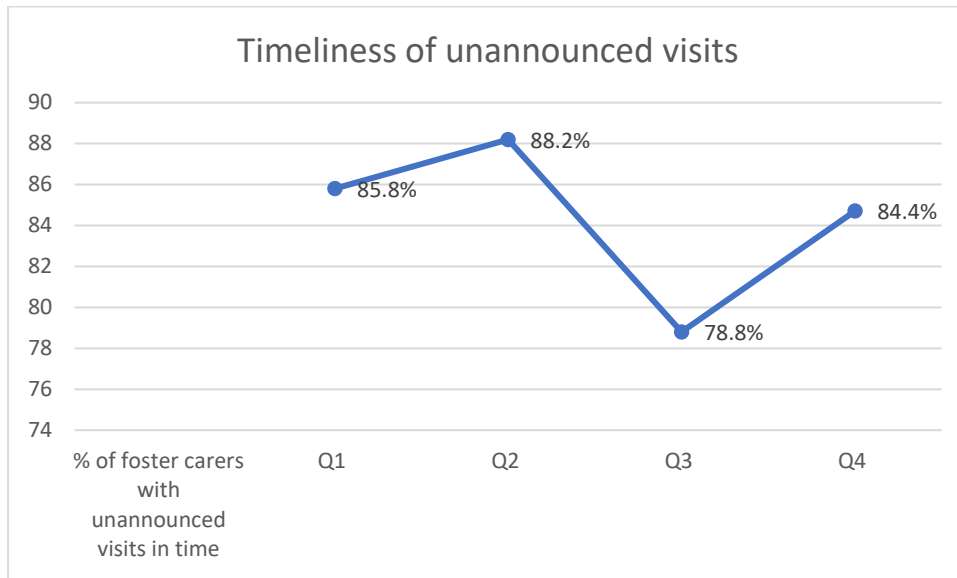


Chart 4

6.12 This is an area that will be prioritised in the new structure to improve performance. There are some logistical difficulties with carers who live some distance away on the mainland, however all carers on the island should be visited within the timeframe required. The year average was 84.4%

6.13 Medical

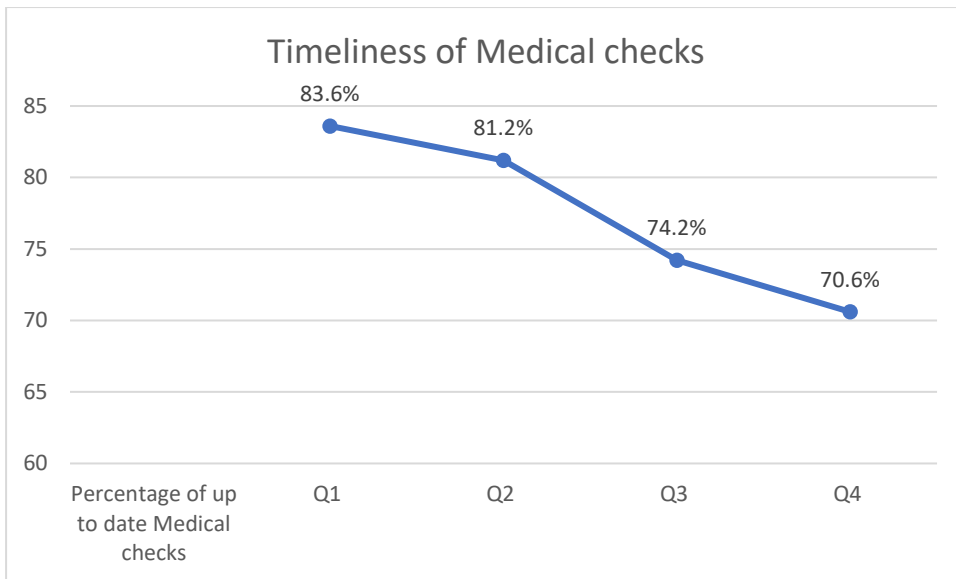


Chart 5

#### 6.14 DBS checks

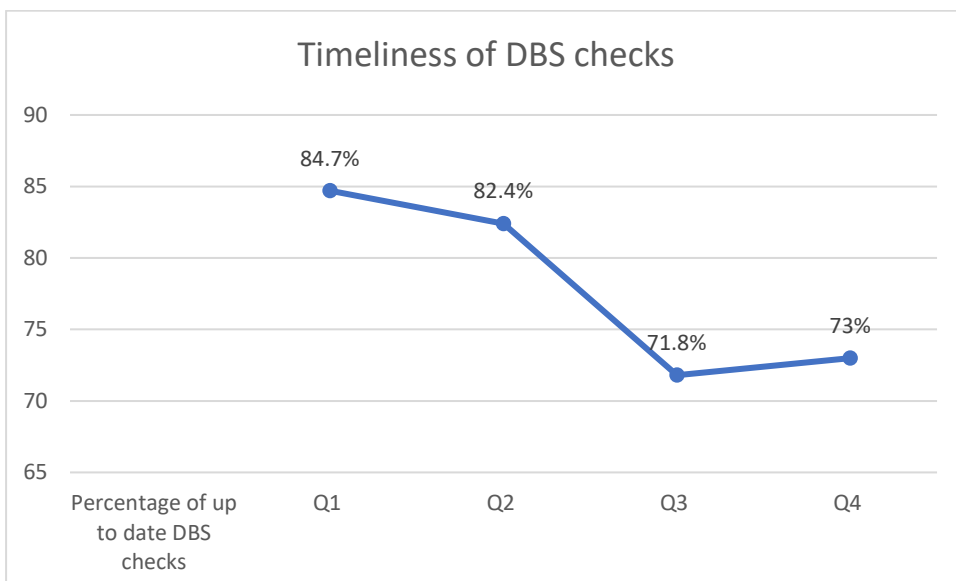


Chart 6

6.15 There is a concern regarding the increasing numbers of overdue medicals and DBS checks. The Year average for up to date medical checks was 77.4% and DBS checks was 78%.

6.16 Medicals continue to be closely monitored and are followed up regularly by administrators who escalate to the team manager. In line with policy the Isle of Wight complete review health medicals every 3 years. Some

carers are having difficulties as some of the local surgeries are refusing to complete these. This has been escalated to senior management. Where we have required one for a court hearing this has been raised directly with the Health safeguarding team to assist. This will be an ongoing issue that will need to be addressed at a commissioning level.

6.17 In quarter 3 we changed our DBS provider using a company “U CHECK”. They provide an automated reminder to the DBS applicant and to the department when/if they have not been actioned/completed within three months. At the three-month point if the request has not been actioned by the foster carer or information verified by the department the request is cancelled. There is a process in place to initiate these checks three months before they are due and these are tracked and highlighted to the social workers to action.

6.18 There will always be a number of DBS checks that are outstanding due to young people turning 18 years whilst in the foster placement, we are unable to initiate a DBS check until their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday which causes an outstanding check whilst we await it being returned.

6.19 Deregistration

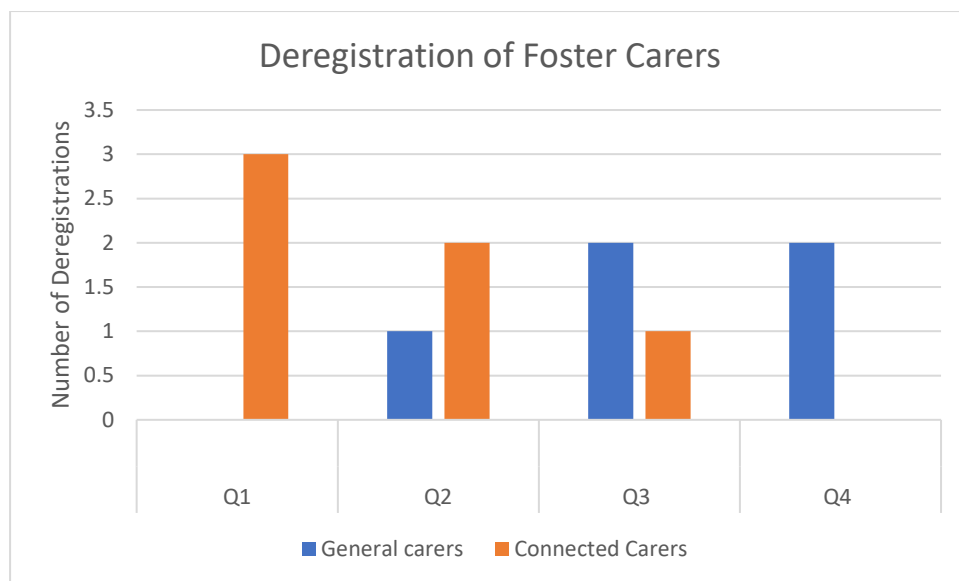


Chart 6

6.20 Over 19/20 there have been 12 fostering household that have been de-registered, 6 of these households were connected carers.

6.21 Of the General Foster carers deregistered, the reasons were as in the Graph below

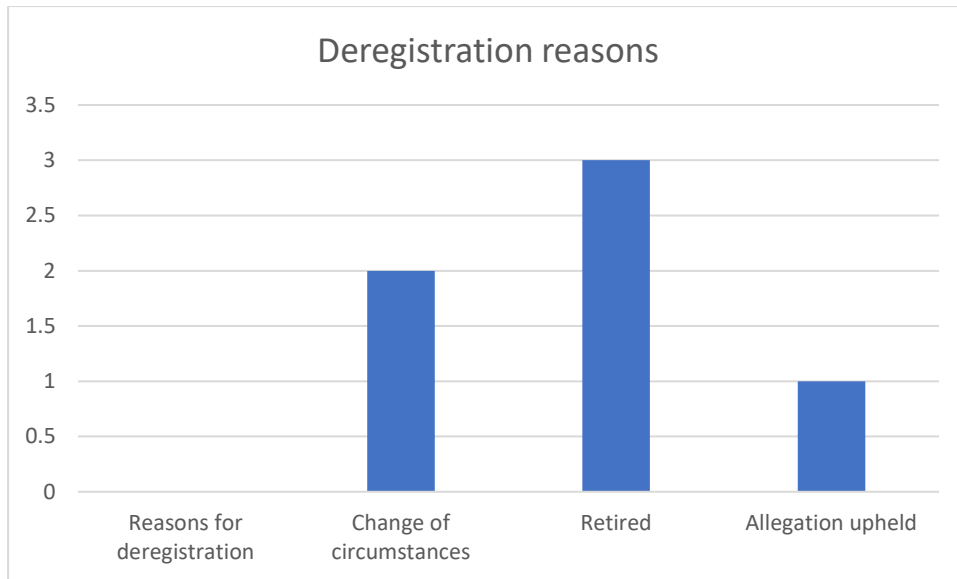


Chart 7

6.22 Of those where a change of circumstances was provided as a reason for deregistration, some of the following themes have been noted.

- Marriage Breakdown
- Family caring commitments

6.23 In 2019/2020 we have initiated an exit interview process for foster carers where they give permission. This has only recently started with minimal response so far but is something that we will build upon in 2020/21.

#### Complaints and allegations against foster carers

6.24 The Council has a Complaints and Allegations against Foster Carers procedure as required by the Fostering Services Regulations 2011.

6.25 In total there have been 27 concerns/complaints/allegations initiated within the 2019/20 period.

6.26 These were categorised as the following

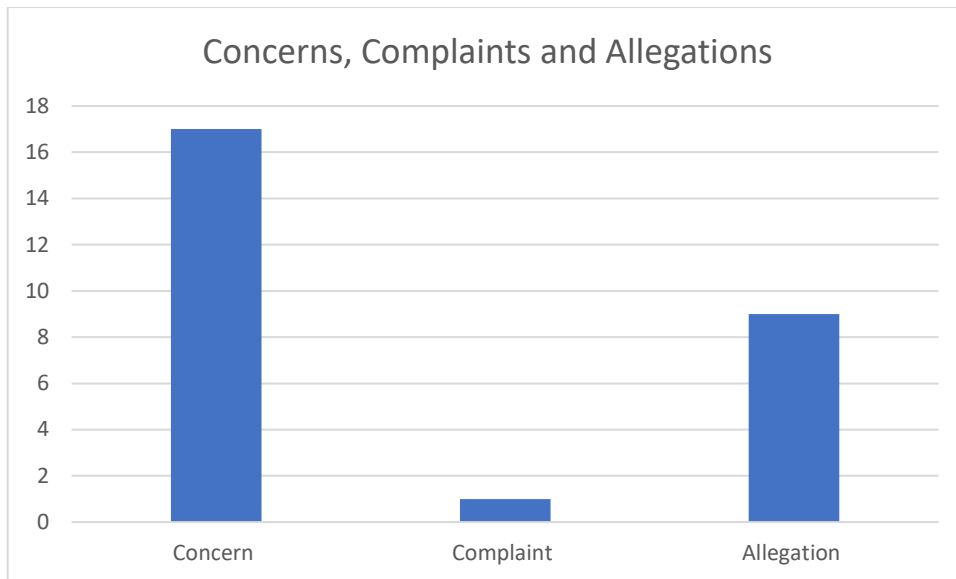


Chart 8

6.27 Of these allegations, the outcomes were.

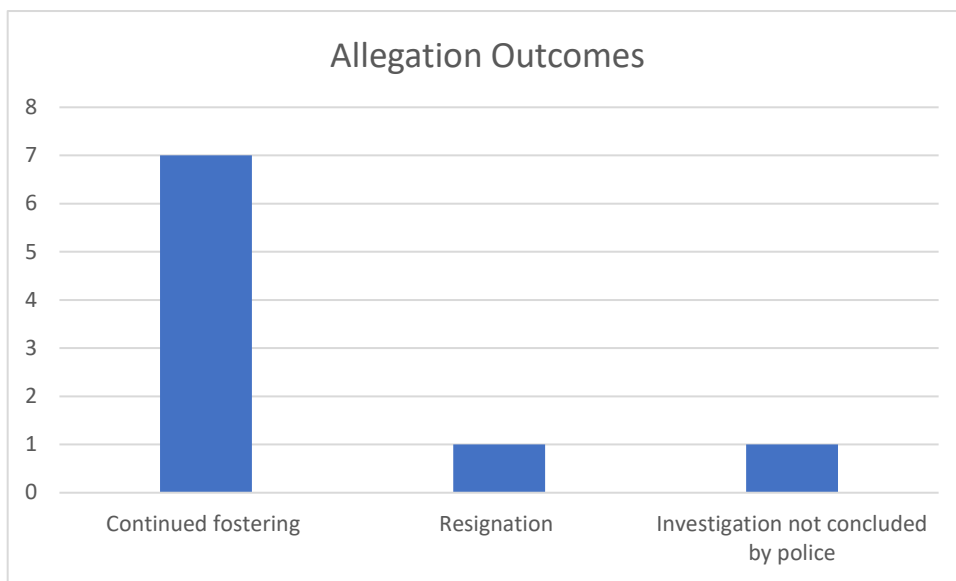


Chart 9

6.28 The Complaint that had been made was not upheld.

6.96 No cases were presented to IRM in 19/20

## 7. Conclusion

7.1 The team have performed well overall however there are specific areas to be addressed within the next year as part of the Modernising Placements Programme.

- 7.2 The team have also had the challenge of working towards a restructure whilst a pandemic emerged and resulted in a lockdown as a result of COVID 19 during March 2020. The team and the foster carers worked well together The use of IT has been a steep learning curve for both staff and carers however this is being successfully managed.
- 7.3 The team will be restructured as of the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020. This will enable the service to have a more focussed and streamlined approach to service delivery and performance management. The areas highlighted in this report will inform the hubs activity for 20/21.
- 7.4 The areas of focus for 2020/21 will be to continue to work on the modernising placements Programme which will:
- Approve 15 more fostering households in 2002/21
  - Provide a strategy to increase in foster carers for teenagers and more complex children
  - Achieve more targeted and timely assessments of prospective foster carers from April 2020.
  - Continue the good performance in the supervision and review of foster carers.
  - Improve compliance with medical and DBS checks on time.
- 7.5 Continue to work on the detailed actions of the Team plan Oct 19 – Mar 21.

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August 2020