



Committee report

Committee	POLICY AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES, EDUCATION AND SKILLS
Date	15 JUNE 2023
Title	FOSTERING ANNUAL REPORT 2022/2023
Report of	DEBBIE PRICE, ACTING AREA DIRECTOR CHILDREN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

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.

Fostering Services work within the Fostering Regulations and the National Minimum Standards for Foster carers as well as the Children Act and Care Standards Act.

Foster carers can be approved by independent fostering agencies or the Local Authority. When the local authority does not have enough foster carers or the right foster carers to meet a child's needs they purchase placements from Independent fostering agencies.

Local Authority fostering services are inspected by Ofsted as part of the overall inspection of Children's Services.

During 2022/2023 the service successfully recruited and approved 7 new General fostering households.

At the end of March 2023 there were 81 registered and approved foster carer households in the isle of Wight with 7 general carer and 2 connected carer households in assessment.

There is a target to recruit 10 fostering households in 2023/24.

1. Marketing

1.1 Marketing activities have been much more varied during 2022-2023, with an increase in recruitment events both virtually and face-to-face. The team are keen on building a strong marketing strategy to increase our enquiry cases and build our identity. A Marketing Apprentice has been an addition to the

team, introduced early 2023, meaning more time and attention can be dedicated to this. The team attended several community events through the summer, such as The County Show or IW Pride, and found footfall numbers were high. We were able to successfully utilise the John Lewis Christmas advert, which drew attention to the topic of fostering, and have a stand put up in Waitrose. The focus for 2023 is to conceive a solid plan for new, creative marketing projects.

- 1.2 Participation activities have been celebrated in the local media, via press release. Good news stories such as this have gained positive attention. Foster carers have given praise to the service for their work in this area. It is intended that the programme will continue to influence positive word of mouth referrals. Carers are positive about the regular activities and competitions and have also expressed that they appreciate the birth children being included in these activities as it promotes the entire household involvement. This will continue and we are asking carers for ideas for future activities.
- 1.3 There has been a strong focus on building our online presence throughout 2022 and into 2023. This has proven to be worthwhile as our enquires have been driven most from Digital platforms; 22 individuals stating that they had come across the service online, either via social media or organically through search engines. The team continue to build on improving our digital marketing methods. The Fostering Facebook page is being regularly kept up to date with engaging content and information regarding our recruitment events. The team are also exploring the idea of having a presence on Instagram, to attract a broader range of demographics.
- 1.4 The service has also taken part in the southeast regional fostering forums 'mystery shopper' exercise. This is now in its 6th cohort and the IOW have undertaken the mystery shopper role. This was interesting as it gave us the opportunity to experience other agencies responses to enquirers and to use the learning to improve our own. Out of 24 LA's and IFA's we had the third highest average score of 7.38. The issue noted for us was the accessibility of the website. The mystery shopper group have randomly looked at LA websites. We were in the January 2023 cohort and whilst the information provided was clear it was basic and did not enable events etc to be publicised. The other major issue was the ability to make an online enquiry. The feedback stated Entering an enquiry is laborious and requires much personal information, when just entering an e-mail address to request an information pack would be less onerous.
- 1.5 The IOW upgraded website has now been fully launched however this still does not enable fostering to have the platform that it needs to be on a more competitive level with other recruiting agencies and does not address the issues raised above. This is being raised as an issue with the Service Manager as Fostering requires its own site akin to the website that Hampshire currently provide for its Fostering Service.

2. The Fostering Service

- 2.1 The Permanence Team is formed of three hubs who each focus on one area of activity. Recruitment and Assessment of Foster carers, support to foster carers and all aspects of Adoption and Special Guardianship
- 2.2 The two Isle of Wight Fostering hubs are comprised of the following:
- 1 Team Manager,
 - 2 Assistant Team Managers,
 - 8.59 FTE Social Workers
 - 3 Fostering Practitioners
 - 1 Marketing Apprentice
 - 1 FTE Social Work Personal Assistant
 - 1 FTE Team Administrator.
- 2.3 The recruitment and assessment hub includes the marketing Apprentice who has a focus on all aspects of marketing to ensure we are attracting applicants who can meet the needs of our children. The social workers undertake joint viabilities with the childcare teams and assess and support all general and connected applicants through to Panel and approval.
- 2.4 The Assistant team manager of the support hub attends the placement meetings held three times a week with the commissioning team to ensure appropriate matching and placement stability. The support hub provides a focussed team of social workers to promote stability, development, and retention of our approved carers.
- 2.5 This has enabled each hub to focus on their specialisms of work and has enabled a more focused approach and improvement to timescales, compliance, and quality assurance.

3. Recruitment of Foster Carers

- 3.1 Targets for our recruitment of Foster Carers have fallen short and therefore not been met. To drive recruitment, the team is actively focusing on delivering a greater range of marketing and recruitment events. However, it is worth noting that the team manager attended the Southeast fostering forum, and it is clear by other authorities that there does appear to be a national issue in terms of attracting foster carers. The issue of recruitment is also being considered within the work of the Modernising Placements agenda. Statistics are again lower than the previous year. It is understood that other local authorities are experiencing the same trends. Influencing factors in foster carer recruitment are believed to be higher costs of living, the war in Ukraine and adjustments to life post lockdown.
- 3.2 The team have held more recruitment activities in the community and are re-establishing the schedule of events for next year back to full capacity. The team made use of the high footfall during the summer season, by attending many community events. This is to be a strong focus again for Summer 2023, as well as the delivering of more effective marketing across ferry links and tourist

attractions. Our recruitment activities have predominately been in the form of pop-up stands in supermarkets, town centres or cafes. However, a more diverse range of activities will be considered.

3.3 7 new General Fostering households have been approved from an initial enquiry count of 57. The end of year conversion rate was 12.2% - which is an improvement on the year before.

3.4 There are two parts to the general fostering assessment – part one where we gather initial checks and references and part two which is the assessment itself. The service continues to complete these concurrently to reduce the time applicants are in assessment.

3.5 Recruitment Data for 2022/23

- Number of enquiries 57
- Number of Initial Home Visits: 31
- Number of assessments initiated: 12
- Number of approvals 7
- Conversion rate from enquiry to approval: 12.2%

4. Fostering support

4.1 It continues to be the aim of the service to ensure that we have a diverse range of foster carers available to meet the needs of Isle of Wight children.

4.2 The Fostering support hub continue to provide support and supervision to all approved foster carers and carers who remain caring for children under staying put (continue to care for children after they turn 18). We continue to provide numerous support groups including monthly lunch and learn/ lite bite sessions, connected carers group, move on to Adoption Group and deliver training which includes Skills to Foster, Fostering Changes, Attachment, Safeguarding/ Safer Caring and Supervised Contact etc.

4.3 Following consultation with carers via their supervisions, we are continuing to provide virtual groups to promote and enable a wider attendance from carers who live on the mainland or have issues that had previously prevented them attending in person. We will continue to work to achieve hybrid arrangements for training and meetings to promote foster carer engagement. We established this with face to face 'lite bites' sessions with a hybrid presence for those on the mainland. We are still working on the technical issues of providing this across all areas. The support hub continues to offer a duty telephone line and are able to arrange virtual teams meetings promptly for carers to ensure they receive the support etc that they require.

4.4 The support hub continues to focus on moving training and support online to increase the opportunity for carers to feel supported and part of the fostering community. This has been especially welcomed by carers who do not reside on the island as they have been able to feel more included and able to access all aspects of Fostering virtually. The support hub has worked with our work force development colleagues and enabled carers to have access to the e learning courses available to the wider workforce. The team have ensured that bespoke training has been recorded and uploaded to the Learning hub so

that this is available to carers. This promotes a wider range of learning opportunities and enable us to monitor and review foster carers progress.

5. Annual Fostering Survey

5.1 In 2022 / 23 the Annual Fostering Survey was revised and sent electronically with expectation that it would increase participation on grounds of convenience. After one month of the survey being live, the number of responses were reviewed, and the uptake remained poor. Individuals from the Council's volunteer programme stepped forward to support the service in collecting feedback from carers. Telephone surveys were offered to Foster Carers, yet engagement in sharing feedback was still very low. We therefore provided an incentive at the Christmas carers event of more raffle tickets if they completed their survey before leaving. 'Surveys means prizes!' This increased the uptake at the event however this still did not exceed the previous year.

In total there were 26 participants. Again, due to a low number of responses the findings were hard to generalise as the sample size was not representative of the population.

5.2 The findings from those who participated in the survey (20 General / 6 Connected), revealed the following key stats:

- 17 (85%) of the General Foster Carer respondents felt that they had **not**, in the past year, taken a placement that they did not feel equipped to care for.
- 69% of **all** respondents feel that they benefit from attending the support groups that are provided by the service.
When asked what benefits they receive from attending these sessions, a clear theme amongst many respondents was social opportunities. Carers also mentioned the enjoyment of taking part in something educational. One carer said the sessions are *'Well run and resourced.'* with *'Interesting guest speakers and subjects.'*
- 73% of **all** respondents feel that the Fostering Service keep them well informed.
- When asked how fostering has impacted their family, one respondent stated that their family are *'extremely supportive but have to make huge adjustments in their lives to accommodate the children and my being entirely focused on our yp's needs.'* This consequently leads to a restrict in their visits due to finding the needs and behaviours of the young person *'very difficult to understand'*.
- 42% of **all** respondents claim to be very satisfied with the fostering allowances that they receive. However, it is evident that carers are concerned regarding rising living costs and expenses. One person stated that the *'Allowance needs to perhaps take into consideration household and daily expenses increase which has greatly escalated in the last 6 months.'* Additionally, another respondent mentions *'When an IRO agrees with you for a hobby to be started but no help in paying towards it, it is pretty much a dead in the water idea at this point.'*

- When commenting on support one respondent wrote: *‘Having always fostered for the Local Authority, we have always received the greatest support from Fostering.’ Yet, they also mention that the ‘Children’s Social Worker side needs to improve.’*
- When asked if they have any additional comments they would like to share, one person said: *‘In the circumstances the service is working, we understand the CSWs are stretched, but the children should not be effected.’*

6. Placements

- 6.1 Based on findings from the survey, 90% of General Foster Carer respondents, felt that they had **not** had children placed with them outside of their approval. In addition, 75% of the respondents felt that they had **not** had a child in placement who they were un-equipped to care for.
- 6.2 The Assistant Team Manager and/or Team Manager attends placement meetings three times per week to discuss and plan potential placements with the commissioning team and the childcare teams. This is now embedded in practise and has continued to support careful matching and maintained placement stability for our children and young people in care.
- 6.3 The supervising social worker ensures that placement planning meetings are held within 72 hours of placement and that the Personal Development Plan provides carers with training to support caring for the child. This is overseen by the Assistant team Manager.
- 6.4 The limited evidence from the Foster carer’s survey would suggest that the strategies in place to support placements is having a positive impact and will be continued.

7. Placement Endings

- 7.1 65% of General Foster Carer respondents said that they have experienced a child leave their care in the past year. 85% of whom, felt that they were able to support the child during this time but not all in this position felt supported by the Team.
- 7.2 Respondent feedback was varied when asked how the Service could better support carers during placement endings. One individual answered with the following: *“Provide a better out of hours support network. They would only get involved if a Safeguarding concern which it was not so the issue became bigger and much more stressful for all concerned plus if this child had been listened to in the first place they would have not acted like they did to control their situation & push Social Workers to find them a placement!”*
- 7.3 End of placement reports and disruption meetings are called when a placement ends. The Child’s Social Worker, the child and the foster carer are requested to write an end of placement report which identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the placement. This information is used to inform and improve practice and to support carers who have experienced an unexpected ending to a placement.

8. Training:

- 8.1 IOW Fostering continue to offer a variety of training in a range of mediums as we maximise on the opportunities offered by the new ways of working. This includes guest speakers, peer led discussions, group programmes and online training platforms via the Learning hub.
- 8.2 Supervising Social Workers identify new training opportunities that will support the Carer's Personal development. Any specific requirements can be discussed and commissioned with approval from the Team Manager and Service manager. This may include 121 training from home. Training will be provided weekdays, weekends, and evenings to facilitate attendance.
- 8.3 The Foster carers training pathway has been revised and includes wider training courses available to carers and we are working with the Modernising placements programme to explore more opportunities to enhance and refine this over the next year. Personal development records are maintained within the learning hub so that these are routinely updated each time a course is completed. This has enabled carers to be able to access training on specific needs for their children as and when they need it. The Support hub are exploring options as to how we can share the content of 'lite Bites' sessions on the learning hub. This will enable carers to have a wider access to these at a time that suits them and to be able to revisit the topics.

9. Improving the Service: the main themes

- Involvement of Foster Carers in supporting recruitment events and the service with different activities.
 - Foster carers to have ongoing access to support and training to maximise the use of IT to engage with learning, using fostering e forms and the virtual world.
 - Foster Carers want to see improvements to allowances.
 - To return to more face-to-face training and social events
 - Continue to focus on compliance and quality of reporting by the social workers.
 - Continued focus on recording systems and refining how current data is to be more aligned and ready to transition to the new IT system Mosaic.
 - To research and scope the ability to have a foster carers portal and a more relevant web page.
- 9.1 The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Approach continues to be embedded within the service. All supervision notes and household reviews are written in the strengths-based way. We are applying this approach across the service. There is still work to be done to review all the current forms used to promote this across the service. Examples of this are the change from respite request to sleepover requests thereby making this a more 'normal', less stigmatising, and understandable terminology for children and young people and also calling 'exit' interviews farewell conversations.

- 9.2 The Fostering hubs are exploring with carers which activities they would be happy to support. We intend to develop this into a spreadsheet so that we can approach identified carers for each area e.g., training. We are also planning to establish a focus group to engage foster carers in future developments of the service to ensure we are continuing to meet their needs. This work has started with regular meetings with two foster carer reps, the Team Manager and the Assistant team manager of the Support hub. Although a relatively new initiative, this is already proving positive with foster carers reporting they feel more informed, and that communication is much swifter both ways to resolve /address any issues.
- 9.3 The Support hub are working with the inhouse volunteers to provide individual IT training and support for carers who are less confident with using computers as this is a potential barrier for them going forwards. We need our carers to be able to monitor and safeguard our young people online. Some carers have also expressed issues in accessing laptops etc that are able to support this activity and we are working with the transformation team to identify how we could provide equipment to carers in the same way we do to staff. This would also enhance the security of data and recording for carers as it would be protected via the isle of wight ICT security processes.
- 9.4 Mainland carers and carers in France can access the IOW fostering training and community and are pleased with the support they have been able to access via this way of working that was not previously achievable. This has been maintained and embedded.
- 9.5 Some foster carers have requested that allowances and payment structures are reviewed. There has been an increase in allowances however the IOW service is currently engaging in the Modernising Placements programme with Hampshire to not only review allowances but to review the whole service delivery to ensure we are prepared for the future.
- 9.6 The service has returned to face-to-face visits and events, however, we also want to maintain the positive gains experienced in developing our online presence and use of technology. We have a more agile approach that is responsive to individual needs to promote stability and ensuring foster carers feel more supported.
- 9.7 The service will maintain the focus on performance and quality of reporting to ensure that prospective applicants and carers receive a high-quality service. This will assist in promoting a positive image of IOW fostering to the wider community.

10. Fostering Panel

- 10.1 The service has 12 fostering panels per year which are held monthly. Each panel will hear a maximum of 6 cases. The Panel Chair and all panel members receive an appraisal annually.
- 10.2 Panel feedback from applicants is routinely sought, however limited feedback is received despite creating an online survey designed to encourage greater

participation. We are asking assessing social workers to promote this given that panels are virtual.

- 10.3 The Service Manager and the Team Manager meet with the panel chair on a quarterly basis to discuss any themes in panel, policy or process issues, and training & development needs.
- 10.4 A training day was arranged for panel members and included in part meeting with the Fostering Service Hubs, to update knowledge of policy, thresholds, good practice and to encourage a more coherent way of working. This was well received. The Panel members were also invited to the allegations training with foster carers and fostering staff and 5 members attended. The purpose of this was to establish a common understanding of the process and to discuss different viewpoints on how to manage and support carers who have and could experience allegations. Again, this was well received.
- 10.5 This year an experienced member of Panel who was also a vice chair retired after long service. A local councillor with the lead for Childrens services was recruited and now sits on Panel as a council representative. The Team Manager continues to actively recruit to expand the diversity and to increase the skills, knowledge and experience available to the panel. The focus this year is to recruit a care leaver experienced young person to the panel.

11. Statistics

In House Fostering

- 11.1 There are different types of foster placement as below. This includes registered carers, Staying Put placements, Supported Lodgings providers and the addition of Connected assessments with children in placement.
- 11.2 This is a decrease from the previous year. These households can be broken down into their different registrations as follows:

Registration	Households March 2022	Households March 2023
General Foster Carer (a person assessed to be a foster carer for any child needing care)	42	40
Connected Foster Carer (a person known to the child who is assessed as a foster carer and specifically approved for this child only)	40	35
Supported Lodgings (carers for children 16+ only)	1	1
Family Link (families providing short breaks to children with disabilities)	0	0
Connected Assessments with Child in Placement (a person who is known to the child who has had a short assessment to ensure that they are safe and has	4	5

had the child placed with them whilst a fuller assessment is completed to enable a child to continue to be cared for by someone they know).		
Staying Put (An arrangement to allow a young person to remain living with their foster carer after they have turned 18)	5	0
Total	92	81

i) *Data Source: Data Provided by Isle of Wight Fostering Service.*

ii) *Date Period: Snapshot as at 31st March 2023.*

11.3 The process for supporting timely returns of applications is now embedded and monitored to ensure it is effective. This has produced an improvement in this area. The Fostering Practitioner attached to the Assessment hub has been on long term sick leave and has now left the service which has impacted on the hubs ability to fulfil the tasks of contacting the applicant if the form has not been returned within this time frame to offer support. This has been shared across the hub to ensure applicants get the support required. We are actively recruiting to the post so that this can be a focussed task within the job role.

11.4 This is a particular focus for connected carers with children placed as these are usually within the court arena and have shortened timescales. The team are ensuring regular contact with the children's social worker to provide a supportive approach to these households.

11.5 The challenge of obtaining sections 4 and 5 of the connected persons assessment from the Child/ren's Social Worker in a timely manner continues to an issue for some social workers. When a connected application pack is posted out, the Fostering admin worker emails the section 4 & 5 templates to CSW involved with a request these are completed and returned within 10 working days and the Fostering Practitioner/ Assessing social worker will continue to chase and monitor to ensure this is completed.

11.6 This has encouraged some improvement in the time taken to receive the documents back but requires ongoing monitoring and oversight to ensure it continues to improve. An ATM is scheduled to attend the CAST team meetings to explain the importance of and why we need these sections to promote greater compliance.

Foster carers on hold

11.7 The average number of general foster carer households on hold during the year has been 2.5 households. This is 6.25% of the available households. These have been for a variety of reasons; the majority being taking a break post adoption move on, a challenging placement or taking time to consider health and work commitments.

Timeliness of household reviews

Reviews completed on time %											
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR
100	98	95.1	85.5	85	83.1	77	74	74	70	65	76.3

- 11.8 This has been identified as a focus for the hub to address. There has been a dip in performance over the year which reflects the impact of staffing capacity. The focus continues to be on achieving compliance to ensure fostering households are well supported with the expectation that all HHR's are scheduled and undertaken within the requirements and that compliance is then maintained. Whilst staffing was an issue the focus was on supervisions to ensure households and carers were supported. This is reflected in the figures below. Measures have been put in place with protected days for workers to complete reviews and they are scheduled into diaries to ensure this is achievable and prevent drift. The 22/23 level was 82%. The target is to return to the level of performance seen in 21/22 of 99%.

Timeliness of supervision visits

Supervision completed on time %											
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR
95.1	92	92	88	99	96.3	94	97	91	97.2	93.2	97.4

- 11.9 This is a good area of performance and evidence that the supervision of foster carers has remained a high priority this year despite the staffing capacity issues experienced the hub achieved 94.4%. Again, the hub has been tasked to improve this target to a consistent 100% with weekly workload lists being shared to ensure any visits are covered where necessary.

Timeliness of unannounced visits

Carers who have had an Unannounced visit within last year and have been approved for one year + %											
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR
83	81	80.5	80.7	67	80	71	62	55	60.3	68	72

- 11.10 This continues to be a focus for the hub as the performance is below expectations. The hub is aware that this is an important indicator as it safeguards children. We have a 'live list' in our teams thread to ensure that workers can access easily carers in an area that they are visiting to undertake unannounced visits to improve performance. This area has also been impacted by staffing issues. The strategy put in place has not achieved the desired approach. Therefore, to improve this area, the ATM will review diaries and allocate unannounced visits to workers to ensure compliance is raised. The percentage last year was 67% and has risen this year to 71.7% and

whilst that is a slight improvement it does not meet the standard required of the Hub.

Medicals

Percentage of Foster carers with health assessments within 3 years											
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR
76.1	82	77	85	85	88	91	93	94.1	94.1	96.7	97

- 11.11 In line with policy Hampshire and the isle of Wight complete review health medicals every 3 years. There was an issue at the beginning of the year when the covid self-reporting ended coupled with the increased pressure on GP surgeries. The service monitored those surgeries and worked with health colleagues to find a way forward. This has improved over the year however health issues will continue to be discussed regularly in supervisions to ensure carers are not neglecting their health whilst awaiting medicals. The average this year was 80.4% although the trend is consistently improving indicating that the strategies in place are working.

DBS checks

DBS checks completed with 3 years %											
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR
99.3	97.8	98.5	98.5	99	98	98	98	98.3	95.8	95.1	92

- 11.13 This is now an area of sustained area of good performance following sustained targeting since the team was restructured. During this time, they have improved the average in 2019/20 of 78% to 98% in 2021/22. Performance has been maintained in 2022/23 to 97.4% However, it is a requirement that all carers have a valid and in date DBS check. This continues to be monitored closely and the target remains 100% every month.

Deregistration

	Q1 2022/23	Q2 2022/23	Q3 2022/23	Q4 2022/23
General carers	3	2	2	1
Connected Carers	4	6	5	1
Total	7	8	7	2

Over 22/23 there have been 24 fostering household that have been de-registered: 8 general households and 16 connected households.

- 11.14 Of the Connected carers deregistered, the reasons were:

Reasons for deregistration	
SGO Granted	5
Returned to parents	5

Staying put/ independent living arrangements	2
Deregistered on conclusion of investigation	1
Resigned prior to conclusion of investigation	1
Gave notice due to false allegations/ child behaviour	2

11.15 Of the General Foster carers deregistered, the reasons were:

Reasons for deregistration	
Deregistered on conclusion of investigation	1
Resigned prior to conclusion of investigation	1
Child remained under staying put	1
Retired	1
Staying put arrangement	1
Change in Employment Hours	3

11.16 Of those where a change of circumstances was a factor for deregistration, the most common theme noted is the need for an increase in work commitments. Of the 24 deregistration's, 18 were for positive reasons.

12. Complaints and allegations against foster carers

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

12.2 In total there have been 1 complaints & 2 allegations initiated within the 2022-23 period. The complaint arose from the allegation so both pertain to one fostering household who resigned during the process.

12.3 These were concluded as the following

Complaint	Allegation
1	2

12.4 Of these complaints and allegations, the outcomes were.

Ongoing case, not concluded	0
De Registered	0
Resigned prior to conclusion of investigation.	1
Continuing to foster	0
Assessment Terminated	1

13. Conclusion

13.1 The team have continued to work well and have been able to demonstrate a greater level of compliance across all areas of work with the exception of Unannounced visits and Household reviews. These areas already have strategies in place to address performance over the coming next year.

- 13.2 Placement stability has been good with proactive support being offered and close links via the placement meetings to ensure better matching with foster carers skills sets. This close working relationship with the child in care team continues and this enables us to provide a holistic approach to supporting children and placements.
- 13.3 Assessment timeliness continues to be strong with action taken to address any delay. Dropout rates have improved, and these are closely monitored to ensure we are providing as much support to applicants to continue with the process. We have reviewed all the cases and there were genuine reasons for ending the assessments that we could not have prevented. This continues to be a concern due to the impact on the number of approvals. This is subject to ongoing monitoring and a new marketing strategy will enable us to target more effectively applicants that are able to meet the needs of our children.
- 13.4 The use of IT is embedded for both staff and carers, and this continues to be promoted and supported. The team have developed strategies to move activities to the virtual world to ensure increased accessibility to the service. The foster carers have access to the wider workforce learning hub and training pathways agreed to support them to achieve training in a more flexible way. Face to face training is returning however we will also promote an ongoing hybrid approach to meet the needs of carers who find attending training more of a challenge due to work commitments etc. We are also reviewing the training offer as part of the Modernising Placements programme. Fostering recruitment and assessment continues to be a major focus of activity and Fostering Panels are now held virtually to ensure there is no delay to applicants.
- 13.5 The team have carried vacancies throughout the year which has been a challenge. Recruitment as with other teams has proved more difficult than in previous years however the team have pulled together to ensure that performance and more importantly the support to applicants and carers has been minimised. The staff that left the service, moved for positive career moves rather than dissatisfaction with the service. We have an established admin hub which has supported the team and enabled the workflow to be effectively monitored, reviewed and streamlined in preparation for a new IT system due in the later part of 2023. This has also supported the team with performance and compliance.
- 13.6 This has been a demanding year for the service, the impact of covid continues to be seen within our children and carers, recruitment has been challenging due to the deficit nationwide of social workers and also the cost-of-living crisis. The impact and outcome of this can be seen in the slight drop of performance in some areas. Continuity of service has been maintained and stability for foster carers has been at the heart of our practice. This will continue as staffing levels rise and we develop the service further over the next year. On reflection, the team have shown dedication and commitment to the service and the needs of our children, and I commend them for their resilience. This has been a successful year despite some of the challenges that we have encountered throughout the year.