

Fostering Annual Report 2020/2021

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Author: Berni Farmer

Service Manager: Debbie Price

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 do 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 2020/2021 the service successfully recruited and approved 9 new General fostering households.

At the end of March 2021 there were 114 registered and approved foster carer households in the isle of Wight.

There is a target to recruit 10 fostering households in 2021/22.

1. Marketing

- 1.1 Marketing activities have continued where possible, and processes have adapted to provide a consistent service. Virtual drop-in events have enabled the service to interact with audiences, who they would ordinarily meet face to face. Virtual drop-ins have a higher level of convenience for attendees as they can engage from their home or on the move. Timings have been less of an issue as events can be played back at a later date, location even more so.
- 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 influence positive word of mouth referrals.
- 1.3 Radio scripts were written in response to the changing situation with covid. Lockdown messages were circulated when audiences were most responsive to community led content. Radio has been a significant platform for lead generation in the past year, possibly due to increased listenership – influenced by ‘stay at home’ culture.
- 1.4 Billboard adverts were commissioned on two separate occasions with targeted messages to key workers; thanking council foster carers for the high level of care they have continued to provide for looked after children. Such statements have highlighted the importance of the role among the community and show that the service gives value to their carers, recognising their work and commitment.
- 1.5 Word of Mouth referrals peaked during the final quarter, suggesting that individuals are making lifestyle choices under influence of their peers, which is possibly an outcome of lockdown, restlessness, and a desire to give back to their community.
- 1.6 The service engaged with national campaigns on social media, including clap for carers and fostering fortnight.
- 1.7 Due to reallocation of corporate resources the launch of the new website has been delayed until 2021. Work on video content is now resuming following a lift on lockdown restrictions.

2. The Fostering Service

- 2.1 The team restructured on the 1st April 2020 during the first wave of the Corona Virus pandemic. 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.
- 2.2 The two Isle of Wight Fostering hubs are comprised of the following:
 - 1 Team Manager,
 - 2 Assistant Team Managers,
 - 6.59 FTE Social Workers
 - 1 ASYE
 - 2 Fostering Practitioners
 - 1 Marketing Officer
 - 1 FTE Social Work Personal Assistant
 - 1 FTE Team Administrator.
- 2.3 The recruitment and assessment hub includes the marketing officer 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 and development 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 Recruitment stats were lower than the previous year. The fall in numbers and conversions could be attributed to the pandemic and periods of uncertainty.
- 3.2 As mentioned previously - all face-to-face processes have been virtual, from information events, pre-assessments, and assessment visits.
- 3.3 While community events were cancelled and lockdown measures in affect, there were very few opportunities to meet people in person. Events have

previously been one of the strongest leads of enquiries, so the outcome was not un-expected.

- 3.4 Despite a fall in enquiries the approval number has equalled to the previous year, resulting in a higher conversion rate of 3.1%. This would indicate we are attracting less people that do not go on to foster.
- 3.5 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. We are now completing these concurrently to reduce the time applicants are in assessment. The restructure has enabled dedicated assessment social workers to focus on timescales and to streamline processes to reduce any delay within assessments.

3.6 Recruitment Data for 2020/21

- Number of enquiries 65
- Number of Initial Home Visits 22
- Number of assessments initiated. 6
- Number of approvals 9
- Conversion rate from enquiry to approval 3.1%

4. Fostering support

- 4.1 It continues to be the 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 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, men's group and deliver training which includes Skills to Foster, Fostering Changes, Attachment, Safeguarding/ Safer Caring and Supervised Contact etc. We will also be starting a group for birth children of foster carers which is due to go live in the first quarter of next year.
- 4.3 On the 16th March 2020 all groups were suspended due to the coronavirus and the government request to comply to social distancing, no group activities and to socially isolate if experiencing symptoms. The support hub offered

regular telephone supervision and support, and face to face supervision if requested and appropriately risk assessed. This has been adapted as local and government guidance has changed over the year.

- 4.4 The support hub has worked hard to move all 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 to enable carers 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.

5. Annual Fostering Survey

- 5.1 In 2020 / 21 the Annual Fostering Survey was sent electronically with expectation that it would increase participation and drive more responses. However, the outcome was very similar to the previous year whereby only a small percentage of carers responded (33.3%).
- 5.2 Due to a low number of responses the findings were hard to generalise as the sample was not representative of the population. The findings from those who participated in the survey (27 General / 5 Connected), revealed the following key stats:
- None (0%) of the respondents felt that they had, in the past year, taken a placement that they did not feel equipped to care for.
 - 61.5% of respondents feel that they benefit from attending the support groups that are provided by the service.
 - 80.7% of the survey's respondents said that they were able to access the training that they needed.
 - 19.2% of respondents don't feel that they are kept well informed. We have asked our supervising social workers to ask foster carers about this and get their views as to how this can be improved.
 - When asked how fostering has impacted their family, one respondent stated that 'It has brought us more together as we work as a team.'
 - When commenting on allowances, one respondent wrote 'as a new carer my skills are not being rewarded or utilised 'officially' based on being a new carer and 'lack of experience'

- 5.3 In a recent focus group, IW foster carers showed a preference for electronic surveys over paper formats and suggested that time was a barrier to completing the survey.
- 5.4 The focus group provided insight into how carers feel about sharing feedback, and so work will be undertaken to ensure higher levels of engagement in the following year.

6. Placements

- 6.1 Based on findings from the Foster Carer Survey, just 15% of carers felt as if they had children placed with them outside of their approval. Despite this, none of the respondents felt that they had a child in placement who they were un-equipped to care for.
- 6.2 The Assistant Team Manager 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 was instigated following the need to work from home to ensure that placement stability and careful matching was maintained throughout the lockdowns.
- 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 this is having a positive impact and will be continued.

7. Placement Endings

- 7.1 26.9% of Foster Carers say that they have experienced a child leave their care. 85% of whom, felt that they were able to support the child during this time and in turn felt supported by the Team.
- 7.2 Respondents who did not feel supported during their end of placement said that "the child's needs were not listened to." and the carer's did not understand the reason why the child was moved and did not have chance to say goodbye. They felt this caused unnecessary Trauma."

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 will continue to offer a variety of training as restrictions and new ways of working become the norm. This will include guest speakers, peer led discussions, group programmes and online training platforms via the Learning hub.
- 8.2 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 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 to include wider training courses now available and we will continue to work with Work Force Development to enhance and refine this over the next year. Personal development records are now maintained within the learning hub so that these are routinely updated each time a course is completed. The Support hub are also exploring how 'lite Bites', our Lunch and Learn sessions, could also be recorded to enable carers to have a wider access to these at a time that suits them and also to be able to revisit the topics.

9. Improving the Service: the main themes

- Foster Carers want to be more involved in supporting recruitment and the service with different activities.
 - Foster carers to have access to support and training to maximise the use of IT to engage with learning and the virtual world.
 - Foster Carers want to see improvements to allowances.
 - To return to face-to-face training and social events
 - Continue to focus on compliance and quality of reporting by the social workers.
- 9.1 The main issue that has impacted on all of us is Covid, the limitations of the lockdowns and the move to more virtual working, meetings etc. It has been

particularly difficult this year in matching children to placements whilst maintaining the safety of the foster carers and their own households. This being said the Fostering community has risen to the challenge and have been flexible in their approach to ensure children are cared for. The service has ensured that higher levels of contact as agreed with the foster carers has been maintained to ensure individual households receive the support they need. This has been regularly reviewed with them as circumstances have changed.

- 9.2 This is also against a background of a service restructure, change of management structure and the loss of a colleague suddenly which affected the whole fostering community.
- 9.3 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.
- 9.4 The Support hub are working with the inhouse volunteers to gain support and training providing individual IT support for carers who are less confident with using computers as this is a potential barrier for them going forwards. We also need our carers to be able to monitor and safeguard our young people online.
- 9.5 Mainland carers and carers in France have been able to access the IOW fostering training and community and are pleased with the support they have been able to access in this new way of working that was not previously achievable.
- 9.6 Some foster carers have requested that allowances and payment structures are reviewed. 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.
- 9.7 The service is returning to more face-to-face visits and events as it is safe to do so, as we have all missed that personal and social interaction. However, we also want to maintain the positive gains experienced over the last year. We envisage having a more agile approach that can be more responsive to individual needs to promote stability and foster carers feeling supported. We will need to work with our carers to achieve this as it is unlikely that we will return fully to the previous ways of working and some may struggle with this.

- 9.8 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.
- 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 Now national lockdown restrictions are easing two training days are being arranged for panel members, to include 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.
- 10.5 The team manager is also in the process of recruiting and interviewing three new panel members to increase the skills, knowledge and experience available 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 an increase from the previous year. These households can be broken down into their different registrations as follows:

Registration	Households March 2020	Households March 2021
General Foster Carer (a person assessed to be a foster carer for any child needing care)	48	49
Connected Foster Carer (a person known to the child who is assessed as a foster carer and specifically approved for this child only)	30	51
Supported Lodgings (carers for children 16+ only)	4	3
Family Link (families providing short breaks to children with disabilities)	0	1
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 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).	4	6
Staying Put (An arrangement to allow a young person to remain living with their foster carer after they have turned 18)	4	4
Total	90	114

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

ii) Date Period: Snapshot as at 31st March 2021.

- 11.3 A previous challenge for the team was the timely return of application forms impacting on the timeliness of checks and references being requested. To address this application packs are now sent out with a 2 week deadline for completion and return. The Fostering Practitioner attached to the Assessment hub will also contact the applicant if the form has not been returned within this time frame to offer support.
- 11.4 This is a particular concern for connected carers with children placed as these are usually within the court arena.
- 11.5 A further challenge for the team remains obtaining sections 4 and 5 of the connected assessment from the Child/ren's Social Worker in a timely manner. To address this when a connected application pack is posted out, the admin worker will also email the section 4 & 5 templates to CSW involved with a

request these are completed and returned within 10 working days and the Fostering Practitioner 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.

Foster carers on hold

- 11.7 The average number of general foster carer households on hold at the end of the year is 2 households. This is 4.08% of the available households. These have been for a variety of reasons, including foster carers choosing to take a break, and other family or work commitments.

Timeliness of household reviews

Overdue HHR's (2020 - 2021)											
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR
20	19	22	22	12	17	20	17	17	1	4	6

- 11.8 This has been identified as a focus for the hub to address during the remainder of this year to bring reviews into a more timely and planned order to ensure compliance. Due to the sudden change in the support hubs staffing there has been a delay in review completion in March 21 this is being addressed to bring this back on track.

Timeliness of supervision visits

% of foster carers with supervision recorded in time	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Year average
	94.5%	92.6%	92.8%	98.2%	94.54%

- 11.9 This is a good area of performance and evidences that the supervision of foster carers has remained a high priority despite the challenges faced due to

the pandemic This is an area that has benefitted from a dedicated support hub.

Timeliness of unannounced visits

Number of foster carers with unannounced visits in time	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	number on time in the Year a
completed	1	9	8	4	22
overdue	21	39	54	61	61

11.10 Face to Face unannounced visits have proved a challenge during the lockdown periods of Covid. However, as restrictions were lifted this was a target for the hub. The hub also explored creative ways to achieve this and to focus on visiting all households. This continues to be an area for development and improvement. This has been impacted in quarter 4 by the loss of a colleague which meant that the plan to address this has been delayed. This will continue to be a main focus for the hub in the coming year.

Medicals

Overdue health assessments												
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	
26	12	4	3	6	4	4	5	6	11	5	6	

11.11 In line with policy Hampshire and the Isle of Wight complete review health medicals every 3 years. Progress has been made with health assessments utilising the covid self-reporting format.

11.12 The carers have been informed that they need to book face to face health assessments once the surgeries are facilitating these to ensure that performance is maintained. The supervising social workers continue to promote this. The carers have received a communication to try and start booking their medicals again and to alert the service if this is refused so that we can escalate this as a priority. Health issues are discussed in supervisions to ensure carers are not neglecting their health during the pandemic.

DBS checks

Overdue DBS												
APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	
18	10	2	1	1	2	3	2	2	2	2	1	

- 11.13 This continues to be an area of improved performance. However, it is a requirement that all carers have a valid and in date DBS check. This is monitored via a spreadsheet and reviewed monthly in advance. This is an improving picture, but the target needs to be nil and this will continue to be the standard to be achieved.

Deregistration

	Q1 2020/21	Q2 2020/21	Q3 2020/21	Q4 2020/21
General carers	1	3	2	2
Connected Carers	1	2	2	2
Total	2	5	4	4

Over 20/21 there have been 15 fostering household that have been deregistered: 8 general households and 7 connected households.

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

Reasons for deregistration	
SGO Granted	1
Returned to parents/ more permanent connected placement	3
Allegation upheld	1
Expected death of LAC child	1
Impact on birth children	1

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

Reasons for deregistration	
Change of circumstances	3
Retired	4
Heath grounds	1

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

- Moved out of area
- Change in work commitments or family situation

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 2 complaints & allegations initiated within the 2020-21 period.
- 12.3 These were concluded as the following

Complaint	Allegation
	2

- 12.4 Of these complaints and allegations, the outcomes were.

Ongoing case, not concluded	1
De Registered	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 the unannounced visits. This has been a challenge and when able to, we have been visiting. The team had a plan in place for the new worker to undertake these to address the issue and to use this as part of her induction to get to know/introduce herself to carers. Unfortunately, due to the demise of a colleague we had to redeploy her immediately to focus on supporting foster carers. This is an outstanding area for the next year which will be addressed.
- 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 has also enabled a closer working relationship with the child in care team to provide a holistic approach to supporting children and placements.

- 13.3 Assessment timeliness has improved with the new focused hub. Dropout rates due to Covid has impacted on the number of approvals. This is being monitored 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 has been a steep learning curve for both staff and carers however again this is being successfully managed. The team have developed strategies to move activities to the virtual world to ensure continuity of service. The foster carers now 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 will return however we envisage this continuing to be a hybrid approach to meet the needs of carers who find attending training more of a challenge due to work etc. 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 staff team have been stable and we have also been able to recruit substantive admin which has supported the team and enabled the work flow to be both reviewed and streamlined in preparation for a new IT system due to come on line in November 2021.
- 13.6 This has been a difficult year for the service for all the reasons outlined earlier however performance has continued to steadily improve. Continuity of service has been maintained and stability for foster carers has been at the heart of our practice. This will continue as 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 all the obstacles put in our way.